

MRS. BRADLEY SERIES

SAY IT
with
FLOWERS



GLADYS
MITCHELL

SAY IT WITH
FLOWERS

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SAY IT WITH FLOWERS

GLADYS MITCHELL

 THOMAS & MERCER

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Published by Thomas & Mercer, Seattle, 2014
www.apub.com

First published in Great Britain in 1960 by Michael Joseph.
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E-ISBN: 9781477869031

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To Margaret Murphy with deep affection

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CHAPTER ONE

Treasure Trove

“Abraham might have thought the Ram in the thicket came there by accident.”

Sir Thomas Browne: Part I of *Religio Medici*
(Section 17)

It is common knowledge that the fabulous cave-paintings of Lascaux, near Montignac in south-west France, and the treasure of Roman-British silver found at Mildenhall in Suffolk were both discovered by accident. Not so well known (since there proved to be good reasons for hushing it up) is the fact that last year there was also a fortuitous discovery of coins and pottery at a place called Wandles Parva, on the borders of the New Forest.

The caves of Lascaux were discovered by a dog followed by five boys. The Mildenhall treasure was turned up by the plough. The Wandles Parva discovery was made by a man named Dick Dickon while digging out a badgers' sett at the corner of his smallholding. What he found—a few Roman silver coins, a black jar, and a rather hideous mask of terracotta—went into his home, for he had never heard of inquests upon treasure trove but only upon dead bodies. It is fair to state, however, that he would have handed current coinage or a piece of modern jewellery to the police without hesitation. He took the Roman coins to an antique shop in

Southampton, was told they were two a penny and that no collector would buy them, took them home and threw them into a table drawer. The black jar, which was completely whole, and the mask, also unblemished, he got his wife to wash in warm, soapy water. She accepted the jar as an ornament, but she relegated the mask (likely, she said, to frighten the children) to the bottom of her wardrobe, where she covered it up with an old jumper.

The objects and the coins had been in Dickon's place for some months when the vicar called to visit Mrs. Dickon, who had recently borne her second child and was due to church.

Introduced into the parlour and invited to take a seat while Mrs. Dickon changed her apron for a nylon overall, the vicar immediately spotted the black jar. He had lifted it off the piano—a period piece of keeping-up-with-the-Joneses in a village which had no electricity and therefore no television sets—and was examining it closely when Mrs. Dickon reappeared.

His errand forgotten for the moment, the vicar exclaimed:

“Where on earth did you get this, Mrs. Dickon?”

Mrs. Dickon explained, adding that there was another bit of a thing upstairs, but that it was too ugly to have on show. She was bidden to go and get it. For good measure she also turned out the coins, but decided to put them back again in the drawer. The man in the Southampton shop had said they were worthless, but Mrs. Dickon had the feeling that coins were money and that the vicar might think it not quite the thing to stick to money unless you had earned it.

The vicar was entranced with the mask.

“But, Mrs. Dickon, this is sensational! I am most interested. Did you know that a Roman road is thought to have run past this village? Wandles was built to the north of the Roman Way in Saxon times. The Way is supposed to join Ackling Dyke, and that same road, when we find it—I have

two people coming shortly upon the trail—may prove to be a continuation of the road mentioned by O. G. S. Crawford as running across part of Beaulieu Heath.”

“Really, sir? Fancy that!”

“It may be no fancy, Mrs. Dickon. Your husband’s fortunate discovery of this pottery should lighten my labours and shorten the time which I might otherwise have had to spend.”

“For why, sir?”

“Pottery as good as this—strange that it should not be broken; unique, possibly; still, the very light and sandy nature of the soil just around here—as I was saying, the presence of this pottery may argue a villa, and a villa should argue a near-by Roman road, since the Romans delighted in urban life and never built even the most grandiose villa very far from a town, so you see, the case for a road, if Dickon has discovered a villa, would almost appear to be established.”

“Yes, indeed, sir. Excuse me, sir, I’ve left my Alfie with the baby and I better see what he’s up to.”

“Oh, dear! I hope you can trust him? Some young children are very jealous of a newcomer to the nest, are they not?”

“Oh, Alfie dotes on her, sir. It’s only that he *experiments*, if I don’t watch out. He means ever so well, I’m sure, but it don’t always do to leave him with her too long.”

She went out, in search of the embryo scientist, to the garden. Left alone, the vicar carried the black jar to the window which, although somewhat obscured by a luxurious curtaining of geraniums, fuchsias, and hanging baskets of ferns, gave a better light than that over the piano, and inspected the prize closely. Then he re-examined the mask which Mrs. Dickon had brought in.

“These,” he said aloud, “must certainly go to the museum in Bosbury public library. Even the Culminster

museum might like them. They can't possibly keep them here. I must explain to them that they can't."

When he got back to the vicarage his wife met him in the hall.

"Hilary Beads is coming to stay," she said. "On Saturday, so I'll have to bustle about. It will be nice to see her again."

"Splendid," said the vicar, aware of what his wife had told him, but thinking also of Roman black pottery and terracotta masks.

"She says you promised to teach her to play golf."

"So I did. Dear me! Why does one undertake these rash commitments?"

"She wants you to read the manuscript of her book about Miss Buss and Miss Beale."

"An excellent book has already been published on the same subject by Mrs. Josephine Kamm, whom, you remember, I met in London."

"Hilary knows that. It doesn't deter her. She says there has been a correspondence in the *Times Literary Supplement* about people writing the same book. It seems it doesn't matter if they do."

"Not the same *book*, my dear. A book on the same *subject*."

"Well, all right, but you know what I mean. She says there was a lot in the *Times Lit.* about the Brontës and other people like that."

"Perhaps it is fortunate that there are *not* any other people like that," said the vicar, who thought *Wuthering Heights* ridiculous.

The vicar's wife grinned.

"Pedantic old dotard," she said. She took him by the arm and led him into the dining-room. "My chief worry," she observed, "is that the Carmichaels are supposed to be coming, too, and you know they always insist upon separate

rooms. Hilary comes on the eleventh for a fortnight, and they are booked for the eighteenth."

"You'll have to put them off, then, I suppose. They'll quite understand, that's one thing. I have never met such a pleasant, accommodating couple."

"I don't care about them much. Phlox gives me the creeps. Oh, but you were going to have such fun with them and your Roman road! It does seem a pity to put them off, and I suppose it's mean to do it, as they booked first."

"Yes, but they're people who never worry about keeping to a programme. Write and explain the circumstances. They've always got some bee in their bonnet which will keep them occupied. They'll find something to do, and come on here afterwards. We could accommodate them on the next Saturday—the twenty-fifth, when Hilary leaves."

"I hate to do it, but it does seem the only thing. I can't ask Hilary to share a room with Marigold," said the vicar's wife, frowning thoughtfully.

"Not if Marigold won't even share with her own husband," said the vicar.

"It's not quite the same thing, Mr. Greatheart. Besides, it was from Hilary's point of view I was seeing it. There's a considerable difference in their ages. Anyway, Hilary's untidiness would drive Marigold insane."

"How long is Hilary proposing to stay?"

"Only a fortnight. You don't listen! She's going to America and her boat leaves from Southampton, so, as this house is more or less on the way, she thought she'd like to come to us again before she sails. I expect it's an act of charity, if we did but know."

"Oh, yes, of course. Well, the money will be welcome, I suppose."

"And now, what were you so excited about when you came in?"

"Was I excited? I don't think I was."

“Come clean. Has Mrs. Dickon joined the Methodists?—or has she refused to be churched?”

“No, of course not. The fact is, Dickon has made a discovery of two very fine Roman pottery things and I think they may indicate a villa.”

“Splendid! You can get plenty of help in the village to dig it out and people will come from all over England to see it—they must all have seen Chedworth and Bignor and that sort of thing by now—and the rich ones will all want our guest-rooms and we’ll simply coin money all the summer.”

“I don’t know what the Bishop would say if he knew that we took in paying guests.”

“Oh, but, darling, he does know. I told him at the palace garden party and all he said was better the guest who pays than the guest who doesn’t, and, often, much more considerate and ever so much better behaved. He’s a lamb, so you’ve no need to worry. After all, he knows we don’t get quite as easy a time as the lilies of the field—not that I spin, although I do think I toil quite a bit. Have you spoken to Dickon about this Roman villa?”

“No. I thought he was with the pigs, but he left them for Opening Time. You know, my dear, I really do think those finds of his should go to the Bosbury museum.”

“Wait until Hilary comes, then, and take her along with you. She’ll soon chisel them out of him. What’s the good of running a marriage bureau and a first-class one, at that, if you can’t manage a bit of sharp practice when it’s necessary? I’ve often suspected Hilary of bringing off more than one doubtful deal, apart from getting her books printed.”

“Mrs. Dickon certainly thought it might be difficult to induce Dickon to part with the finds.”

“In that case, the machinations of Hilary are obviously called for.”

“Well, let us hope that small Alfie Dickon isn’t allowed to experiment with the things and break them before Hilary

comes along.”

Hilary came along by the appointed train and the vicar met her at the station with his new car.

“*Tiens!*” said Hilary, a very smartly-dressed, stylish woman in her middle thirties. “*L’automobile!* How did you get it? Last time I came you met me with a vintage model of London-to-Brighton fame.”

“Veronica thought it bad for business to meet the guests in an old and battered car,” the vicar explained, “so we bought a new one.”

“But what does the parish think? Are you suspected of having had a go at the Pools?”

“I don’t believe the parish does think. At any rate, no speculative gossip has come to my ears about the car. Do you like it?”

“Yes, but I’m sorry to see the old one go. It had a way of coughing in an apologetic sort of way whenever it was going to conk out on a hill, or half-way through a water-splash, that really went to my heart. Well, and what fun have you decided on for me this week?”

“As a matter of fact, I want to send you on a mission.”

“*What!*”

“Oh, not that sort of mission. Veronica thinks that you, with your popular touch, and so on, could persuade Dick Dickon to send his Roman stuff to the Bossbury museum. They’ve a respectable little collection there in the library vestibule and Dickon’s finds should be added.”

“Tell me more. What *are* Dickon’s finds?”

The vicar told her all that he knew. She affected great interest. On the third morning of her stay—nothing more having been said in the meantime about Dickon and his finds—she raised the matter of going over to his smallholding to talk to him. She elected to go alone, (although the vicar’s wife offered to accompany her), was directed to the place and came upon Dickon’s wife feeding the chickens. Hilary said that she was staying at the

vicarage and had been told about the finds. She begged to be allowed to see them.

"Well, I don't know," said Mrs. Dickon. "Don't give they hens no more, Alfie. No, you can't have no more in your basin. You don't want the hens to be too fat to lay a nice brown egg for your breakfast. I don't know, miss, I'm sure. You're the second one today as has asked to see them, and I couldn't refuse the other lady, her being squire of the village, as you might say."

"I'll promise not to handle them, of course, but it's not every day one gets the chance to see real old Roman stuff that has actually been found in the neighbourhood. One usually has to go to a museum for that," said Hilary, putting on a false but persuasive smile.

"If the vicar have his way, that's where you *would* have to go and see 'em, miss." Mrs. Dickon spoke tartly, having no use for Londoners.

"Yes, a lot of people would be able to see them there, though. This, a private view, would be something quite special for me and I should like it very much. Still, they belong to your husband, of course, so . . ."

"Actual, like, they belong o' me. Oh, well, I s'pose there's no reason why you shouldn't have a look. You won't wake the baby, will you?"

"Oh, have you a baby? Boy or girl?"

"A girl, miss. Good as gold, she is."

They passed through a gate and along a path and so to the back door of the cottage. Hilary slipped a surreptitious threepenny bit to Alfie who, as she had foreseen, instantly demanded permission from his mother to go out and spend it.

"Really, miss, you shouldn't have ought to give 'im anything, but it's very kind of you. Go along, then, Alfie, and mind how you goes. If you sees that there old school attendant on 'is bike, like, you just get be'ind the 'edge. 'E did ought to be going to school, like, at 'is age," the mother

explained, as Alfie cantered away, “but I never liked school myself, and ‘is father never liked school, so I ‘aven’t sent ‘im yet, nor shan’t until ‘e’s seven, if I can ‘elp it.”

“The Greeks had the same idea, Mrs. Dickon. In any case, as the formative years are from one to five—or so I’m told—there seems no point in sending a child at all, so far as the basic plan of his character is concerned.”

“That’s right, miss. Seven is quite soon enough. I don’t want ‘im book-learned. If there wasn’t no book-learnin’ there wouldn’t be no Hatom Bomb, so far as I can see. And that’s not the only nasty thing as us could do without. These ‘ere’s the things, miss. ‘Andle ‘em if you wish, though I’ve polished ‘em once today.”

Hilary duly admired and appraised the finds. Her admiration of them was over-done and struck such a false note that Mrs. Dickon observed that Dame Beatrice, up at the Stone House, had advised her not to be too certain of their antiquarian value, as she had seen modern copies, very similar to the finds, being sold in the streets of Italian towns.

“I don’t suppose she knows the difference between fakes and the real things,” said Hilary, resentfully. “Lots of people will try to tell you that your treasures aren’t much good just because they envy you and would really like to possess the things themselves.”

“Very like, miss, but, to my mind, our Dame Beatrice wouldn’t act mean like that. Very clever she is, and what you would call a real lady of the true, old-fashioned sort. Anyway, miss, Dickon give ‘em me and I know ‘e wouldn’t care for me to part with ‘em. It ent right nor proper to part with things as is give you, not for love and neither for money, it ent. Vicar be welcome to come ‘ere and see ‘em whenever he like, but I baint givin’ nawthin’ away.”

“I’m afraid I didn’t make any impression on Mrs. Dickon,” said Hilary, when she returned to the vicarage. “In fact, she didn’t like me, I know.”

"Did you actually see the finds?" the vicar demanded.

"Yes, but I'm not an expert and, as I tell you, I wasn't made particularly welcome. It appears that they'd had one visitor already, before I got there."

"Who would that have been, I wonder?"

"Somebody whom Mrs. Dickon referred to as the squire of the village. That ugly old witch up at the Stone House. *You know!*"

"Oh, Dame Beatrice! What made *her* take an interest, I wonder? She's a psychiatrist by profession and (I think) preference, and spends more than half her time in London, where she has a house in Kensington and a clinic in Queen Anne Street."

"She had heard about the finds from her secretary, who had been to complain to Dickon about digging out a badgers' sett. He came back at her with the news of his finds and boasted that you had said they were Roman."

"Laura Gavin. Takes a great interest in country life. Dickon wouldn't get far arguing with her if her indignation was aroused. Besides, she's quite right. Badgers are the most harmless, friendly animals. I suppose Dickon had some feeling that they might attack his chickens. An extremely foolish idea."

"It seems that Mrs. Dickon did not get very far with Dame Beatrice, who pronounced the things to be modern fakes."

"What!"

"Oh, yes. At least, she warned her that they might not be genuine."

"Dame Beatrice is not an expert," said the vicar.

"Besides, why *should* the pottery be faked?"

"I haven't a clue, dear sir."

"It doesn't make sense," said the vicar. "And I shan't allow Dame Beatrice's opinions (much as I respect her) to knock my Roman road on the head. Fakes, indeed! As I say, who would take the *trouble* to fake them, anyway?"

“Marigold and Phlox Carmichael,” said the vicar’s wife. “You know what fanatics they are! And, in my opinion, utterly dishonest.”

“Oh, come, my dear! They always pay their bills!”

“That is not what I meant. They’re a very fishy couple, if you ask me. My woman’s intuition tells me so.”

“Really, you know, that is absurd. It also strikes me as unfair. They are rather unusual types, but that should not necessarily be held against them. You must be more charitable, my dear,”

“I wish I were going to meet them,” said Hilary. “It’s so difficult to meet fishy customers in polite society . . . people who are *known* to be fishy, I mean. Although I must say I wouldn’t trust some of my clients very far. Still, that’s not my business.”

“Really, Veronica, you should not have said what you did about the Carmichaels,” said the vicar. “I protest. They are quite, quite charming.”

“Then it’s all the more of a pity that I’m not going to meet them,” said Hilary Beads. “Or am I? Do they live in these parts?”

“No, but they come and stay here occasionally. They called once, a while ago—some time ago, in fact, when they were hiking in the New Forest—to ask whether we could recommend somebody in the village who would put them up for a night or two, and I said they could stay here if they were prepared to pay a guinea a day each . . .” said Veronica Pierce.

“Shameless!” said the vicar. “Well, I must go.”

“. . . and they jumped at it, and have been here two or three times since,” said his wife triumphantly, blowing a kiss towards his retreating back.

“So, really, you know them pretty well. What are they really like?” asked Hilary.

“I simply do not know. Incidentally, they’re coming here after you’ve gone.”

"Oh, Lord! Have I done them out of their vested interests?"

"Certainly not. If you have, I'm jolly glad. It was rather nice to write and tell them they couldn't come until the twenty-fifth."

"Veronica, you're heartless!"

"Yes, where the Carmichaels are concerned, I believe I am."

"That seems to answer the question I asked a while ago."

"About what they're like? Well, it doesn't really answer it, because I don't know why I don't care for them. I just don't. Gascony thinks I'm prejudiced and that it's all a lot of nonsense, but there it is."

"I simply *must* meet them! It's so unlike you to be unreasonable about people."

"Especially when they pay so well and complain so little. I know. It does seem a shame. I *can* tell you one thing that makes me feel uncomfortable with them—they never seem to me like a married couple."

"Really? What fun!"

"Well, it isn't, actually. Not in a vicarage, you know."

"But you're not responsible for their morals."

"I know, but you can't shrug things off like that."

"Oh, can't you? I jolly well could, particularly when, as you say, they pay so well."

"Actually, their relationship is an odd one—oh, dear, I'm gossiping! You really shouldn't encourage me!"

"I shall encourage you for all I'm worth. Tell me all about their oddness! I do hope it's scandalous. I have to keep my business so clean that scandal is the breath of life to me."

"That's just what it isn't. Separate rooms and the most *staid* sort of affection for one another."

"Oh, but lots of elderly couples . . ."

"They're *not* elderly. Phlox can't be more than about thirty-five and Marigold is quite ten years younger, I should

say.”

“All passion spent, perhaps.”

“I’m sure there’s never *been* any passion. I do think, though, that they share the same thoughts. Time and again you find that one of them says something just before the other can get it out. It’s quite uncanny.”

“They sound like identical twins.”

“Oh, no. Apart from the obvious difference in their ages, they aren’t a bit alike to look at. Phlox is tall and thin and looks as though he’d snap like a dead stick if you bent him; and Marigold is little and fair and mousy.”

“It isn’t like you to take an unreasoning dislike to people. I do wish I were going to meet them.”

CHAPTER TWO

The Roman Dig

“I cannot laugh at, but rather pity, the fruitless journeys of Pilgrims, or condemn the miserable condition of Fryars.”

Ibid (Section 3)

PHLOX and Marigold Carmichael were generally regarded as anti-social cranks by their houseboat neighbours. It was a harsh but not unconsidered verdict. It was true that Marigold had been privately educated (whatever that may mean in these days) and that Phlox, so far as the public schools and the universities were concerned, had not been educated at all, and it is also true that they had once organised a self-conscious, ill-attended gathering billed as a Progressive Educational Fair, but none of these things made them abnormal, even though it gave them nothing much in common (except for the ownership of a houseboat) with their riverside acquaintances. These, however, disliked them.

Each had enough money to live on without being compelled by necessity to take up paid employment (for which, in any case, their upbringing had made them unfitted) and Marigold, actually, was rather well-off. They called themselves an archaeological research team, a

vague, unprofessional claim which they honoured by the variety of their interests.

At one time, for example, their whole attention was given over to disc barrows; at another they pot-holed with fervour, hoping to find traces of primitive man. The Sutton Hoo ship-burial fired such interest in them that Phlox tried to break into the stronghold of a well-known archaeological journal with a thoughtful but unscholarly comparison of the carvings on the ceremonial whetstone (found on the ship) with the painted wooden figures of women-servants of the eleventh dynasty in Egypt. He even took the trouble to distinguish between one Egyptian figure, dated 2000 b.c. and housed in the Metropolitan Museum of New York, and another of the same date to be seen in the Louvre, pointing out that the former conveyed an impression of seriousness and a hint of the same hair-style as that of the Saxon carving, but that the Parisian exhibit, as one might expect, had the impudent face of a *gamine* and a totally un-Saxon hair-do.

The well-known archaeological journal returned the contribution with the well-known courteous regrets. Marigold was extremely disappointed, and Phlox said acidly:

"We can't expect everybody to have our breadth of thought, dear. We are pioneers. In spite of the somewhat short-sighted policy of this journal, my work goes on. What shall we tackle next?"

"Do you want to help the Reverend Mr. Pierce to identify his Roman road? It doesn't sound particularly interesting. There are so many Roman roads."

"Yes, but we've promised, so I think we must keep to what was said. When we've helped him out, there are two things I'd like to do."

"I can guess what one of them is," said Marigold, "and it shall be as you wish, dear. It is nice that we are going to Wandles Parva again, because it makes a starting-point for you, doesn't it?"

"I don't really know, for once, what you are talking about, my dear. To what do you refer?"

"Eighteenth-century follies, Phlox."

"Eighteenth-century follies? Gambling and drinking and lechery in high places, do you mean?"

"No, of course not!" said Marigold, shocked. "How could you think I meant anything of the kind? I meant buildings."

"Oh, I see. But the observation tower in the Manor House park is not really a folly, you know. It had quite a serious purpose, I am certain. The good vicar thinks it was built as a sort of retiring room for the master of the house, and I am bound to admit that the local history I once consulted in the Culminster public library bears him out."

"But you have another theory? I do think you're clever, Phlox."

"An intelligent man likes to work things out for himself. My belief is that the owner was an amateur of astronomy. There was an enormous interest taken in the sciences during the eighteenth century, when that tower was built, and when I was up there with the vicar I am almost certain that I could identify the mark left by a telescope which had been rested upon the railing."

"Oh, how very interesting! You *must* take me up there to see it this time when we are there!"

"You have no head for heights, my dear, and you always turn dizzy and lose your nerve on a steep stairway, so I think *not*."

"Just as you decide, Phlox. But if you don't want to track down eighteenth-century follies, what *do* you want to do? I mean, quite *why* are we going to Wandles? Just to help the vicar with his roads and his stupid villa? What shall we be doing after that?"

"We've never done the cave-paintings."

"Oh, Phlox, what a splendid idea! Lascaux? La Grèze?"

"Spain first. The Sierra Morena, La Pileta, Peña Tú, Homos de la Peña, and Mas d'Azil."

"I thought it was painted pebbles at Mas d'Azil, not rock paintings."

"I believe you are right. Then we could go to Esperança in Val de Jonco."

"Portugal? I adored Lisbon when we were there!"

"Splendid! Then we could do the French caves on the way back, if you liked."

"How good you are to me in every way!"

Phlox smirked, and smoothed the sleeve of his violet silk shirt.

"Oh, well!" he said. "After all, I have cause to be obliged to you, too. You are a wonderful companion, my dear. But now, to business! What we require are pen and pad, to remind the vicar of our imminent arrival at his manse, and then to walk Hadrian's Wall in order to tune our thoughts to the right channel and refresh our memories."

But their arrival at the Wandles Parva vicarage was not quite as imminent as they had expected. There was a letter for them when they were preparing to visit Housesteads and Corbridge and to see the Solway Firth from Winshields Crag. Phlox heard the postman, dropped his rucksack in the little galley at the end of their floating home, crossed the rather crazy gang-plank to the letter-box on shore, and returned with some bills and the vicar's wife's missive.

"From Wandles Parva," he said, examining the postmark.

"Oh, dear! Can't they have us? Oh, I expect it is only to confirm our booking,"

"They *can* have us, but not when we said, so I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll walk the Wall, as we've planned, and then we'll get down to Wandles Parva a little earlier than they expect us. What about the Wednesday?"

"There'll be nowhere to sleep if we can't go to the vicarage, though. Haven't they offered us an alternative date?"

"I have already told you that we can go, but I want to plan it. A cup of tea, dear, and then we shall need the one-inch Ordnance maps one seven nine and one eighty. I'll be looking them out while you brew up."

He studied his maps and then O. G. S. Crawford anew and announced that, after they had come south from Hadrian's Wall, they would travel to Southampton, cross by ferry to Hythe, walk along the Beaulieu road, and so on to Beaulieu Heath and try to follow the Roman causeway.

This they did, on Wednesday, May 22nd, setting out at dawn. In the early afternoon they were in the village of Wandles Parva, Phlox having satisfied Marigold by announcing his intention of finding hospitality in a cottage until it was time to go to the vicarage. Just outside the village they met a brisk, well-shod woman wearing sunglasses of a very dark colour and with very fancy rims, a tweed skirt and a bright yellow twin-set. She stood stock-still at the sight of them.

"Pardon me, madam," said Phlox, flourishing his panama, "my wife and I are due to stay as the paying guests of the Reverend Mr. Pierce in three days' time. My name is Carmichael. We booked for last Saturday, but have been put off a little. Meanwhile we are hoping to hear of a farmer or cottager with a couple of spare rooms. Eggs, farmhouse bread, and a soupçon of fresh butter will provide for our basic needs, and we shall, of course, pay any modest reckoning which is asked. Do you know of such a farmhouse or such a cottage?"

The woman looked at the couple in a thoughtful but perfectly polite way for a minute. Then she shrugged her shoulders, took out a silver case, lighted a cigarette, drew on it, removed it, and nodded.

"Two miles further on," she said, jerking her head in the direction they were facing and from which she herself had come, "you'll see double gates to a double-fronted house. Farmer Topps is the name. Here, I'll write it down for you."

She took out a used envelope, tore it open and scribbled on the inside.

"Very many thanks indeed to you. Farmer Topps? Double gates? A Georgian house, no doubt?" said Phlox, gallant and at his ease as he watched her while she wrote.

"Yes, a Georgian house and a *jolly nice couple* living in it," said the woman, with extreme emphasis. She handed over the envelope and then took off her sunglasses and looked coolly at him. Phlox stared at her, an expression of complete and incredulous surprise on his face. Marigold put a hand to her mouth, but did not succeed in stifling a scream.

"Well, I hope that Topps can put you up all right. Good luck! You'll need it," said the tweed-clad woman decisively. "I shall expect to be recompensed, you know." She laughed sardonically. Phlox bowed, master of himself once more.

"My card, Hilary," he said. "Let me know when you would like your little reward, won't you?" He scribbled hastily on the bit of pasteboard and thrust it into her hand. She did not even glance at it. She smiled, and put it into her jacket pocket. Phlox raised his panama hat and he and Marigold walked on, Phlox holding Marigold's arm to steady her.

When she had walked on a little further down the road, the other woman took out the card, read what he had written, smiled again, and transferred it to the slightly torn lining of the otherwise immaculate handbag she was carrying. The whole transaction had been watched and the conversation overheard by a small, rather disreputable boy who was on the other side of the hedge and whom none of the party had spotted. He was taking an afternoon off from school and had no desire to be seen by anybody, even a stranger and a visitor.

"Well, that was all very, *very* peculiar," said Marigold. "Don't look round. I don't want her to think we're discussing

her. She really *is* a strange and terribly frightening woman. Don't you think so?"

"I thought her quite charming and very helpful," said Phlox, with a peculiar smile. "You know, Marigold, I think I shall go to Southampton and buy a fishing rod."

"There is not much free fishing around here, I imagine. I suppose the Avon would be your nearest river and the fish there are not confined to trout," observed Marigold, paying no attention to the fact that her last question had not been answered truthfully.

"No," agreed Phlox, turning to look back. "There are barbel, I believe, and giant pike. Oh, well, to greet Farmer Topps and bargain with him for food and lodging. Two miles? We shall just catch the farmer at tea. I hope he invites us to share it. It seems a long time since we consumed our sandwiches and weak tea on Beaulieu Heath."

They did not get to Topps' farm, after all. Along the road they met a party of small boys in grey flannel suits, scarlet caps, and scarlet-topped grey football stockings. They were in charge of a bull-voiced, aggressively genial man of about thirty years of age. As the Carmichaels came level with the party, which, apart from the booming tones of the master, was shrill-voiced and cheeped incessantly, one of the children yelled, above all the rest:

"Oh, sir! Oh, rot it, sir! The heel's come off my shoe!"

"Oh, hell! Rot *you*, Simon!" bellowed the master. "What on earth were you doing to drag the heel off a shoe, you clumsy young idiot?"

"Sir, nothing, sir, really I wasn't. It just fell off. Look for a big stone, you bronchos, so I can bash it on again!" And the casually seated himself on the grass at the side of the road, took off his shoe, and waited serenely for assistance from his fellows. These seemed less eager to help him than he appeared to anticipate.

"Sir, if we louse about here getting stones, we won't have enough time to look for the Roman finds, sir."

"There aren't any big stones, sir, anyway—only these little flints at the side of the road."

"If we found a Roman quern, sir, and used it to bash old Sysko's shoe, sir, wouldn't that do? We could leave him here until we come back, sir . . ."

"*With* the Roman quern, sir . . ."

"If we found a Roman catapult, sir, we could hang Sysko's shoe on a tree, sir, and wham at the heel with the catapult. *That* ought to fix it on."

"Doyng!"

"Splat!"

"Phee-ee-ee!"

"Wham!"

"Shut *up*!" said the master. "Simon, there aren't any stones. Stay where you are until we get back. I can't dish the whole expedition for one silly ass who can't keep the heels on his shoes."

"Hot dog, sir!"

"*Jolly* hot dog!"

"So long, Sysko! Be seeing you!"

"Suppose we find a skeleton, sir?"

"Whacko! Bags I find it first!"

"Could we put it in the school museum, sir?"

"Would it haunt the school, sir? I read a story once about a skeleton that was built into a grandfather clock, sir, and it used to clump upstairs in the middle of the night, sir . . . the clock, sir . . . and knock on people's bedroom doors, sir . . ."

The voices faded in the distance and Phlox and Marigold came up to a dismal little boy who, wearing only one shoe, was dispiritedly banging the other on to the surface of the road. Phlox unslung his rucksack.

"One moment, my dear fellow," he said. He produced a geological hammer. "Allow me." He picked up the heel and the shoe, scrutinised both, then took out a wooden darning aid shaped like a mushroom. A few scientific taps of the

hammer, with the shoe supported on the mushroom, and the heel was on again and, tested by Phlox, seemed fairly firm.

"Oh, thanks *awfully!*" said the child, beginning to back away.

"Go very gently on it," said Phlox. "And, before you leave us, do tell me the object of the expedition and why your companions were so eager to continue on their way."

"Oh, well, a chap—he keeps pigs and chickens and things—was digging up his place and found some Roman treasure, so we asked Mr. Colson if *we* could have a go, so he asked Mr. Brooker and Mr. Brooker wrote to the chap, and the chap said we could, so Mr. Colson's taking us."

"Splendid. I wish you every good fortune."

"Thanks . . . and thanks an awful lot for the shoe."

Regardless of Phlox's warning that the shoe repair had been of the most temporary kind, the little boy, with a polite tug at the peak of his cap, tore after his companions, screeching joyously.

"Well," said Marigold, "it seems as though Mr. Pierce had something more to go on than just a hunch when he declared that there was a Roman road near this village. I am all agog to get to the vicarage to be regaled with full details, aren't you?"

"Yes, indeed. But now for the farm, unless . . ."

"Oh, I *do* agree! I should love to see those dear, enthusiastic little chaps at work. How thrilling for them if they *do* find something! And, of course, they might."

The progress of a party of little boys is invariably on the slow side, and it was easy enough for Phlox and Marigold to catch the children before they arrived at the smallholding. Phlox addressed himself politely to the master-in-charge.

"Would you have any objection? Officially interested, don't you know. Tremendously keen archaeologists. Guests of the vicar of Wandles. So fascinating if your lads actually found traces of a Roman road. The vicar is convinced that

there was a villa hereabouts, and that does rather argue a road, does it not?"

"Yes, it might," said the master. "I don't suppose anyone will object if you come along with us, so suit yourselves. My name's Colson, by the way."

"Ours is Carmichael. Thank you so much."

The discoverer of Roman coins and pottery was at the gate of his smallholding to let the party in and gave no indication of surprise to find it richer in adults than he had expected. He conducted the excited, chattering gathering of little boys past piggery and chicken-run to the northwest corner of his property.

"There you be, then," he said.

"Now, we haven't shovels for everybody," said Mr. Colson. "You know that. You'll have to take turns."

An hour's strenuous exercise yielded no results except for some spirited expostulations from the members of the group, and a few dozen shrill questions.

"Look *out*, you ass! You nearly got my fingers with that shovel!"

"Come on, Pragso! Let someone else have a go! Sir, barge Pragso off the shovel, sir! I'm sure he's had his five minutes!"

"Let's have the trowel, Markso! Sir, it's *my* go with the trowel, isn't it? Give it up, funny cad! . . . Yes, you jolly well *will*! Sir, why didn't we bring the gardening forks from school, sir?"

"Sir, is it true you can get fifteen pounds for a first-century Roman coin, sir?"

"*Shillings*, you fool! Yes, you can. I read it in the paper. Did you read about it, sir?"

"Oo, sir, look, sir! Saintso's found a bone, sir! Woof! Woof!"

"Shut up, you clever lunatic! It's more than *you've* found, anyway! I suppose it couldn't be a *Roman* bone, sir, could it?"

"Buried by a Roman dog, sir?"

"*Cave canem!* Woof, woof, woof!"

"The Romans didn't *have* dogs, Bighead!"

"How could they have said *Cave canem* if they didn't have dogs, you fool?"

"They *did* have dogs. The Britons exported them, sir."

"I should be interested to know their real names," said Marigold, as the archaeologists, firmly and vociferously (at last) debarred by Mr. Colson from prosecuting their researches, reluctantly put down shovel and trowel and wiped soiled palms and fingers down the sides of their grey flannel shorts.

"Simon, Charles, Richard, Francis, Mark, Nicholas, Andrew, and Raymond," replied Mr. Colson. "Otherwise, in obedience to the social code of the moment, Sysko, Pragso, Chardso, Frankso, Markso, O'Lasko, Saintso, and Mondso."

"Thank you so much. How very interesting. A social code, you say? I understand all except Pragso, which appears to derive from the name of Charles."

"The Prince of Wales, you know."

"Oh, the Duke of Windsor was at Oxford, and this little lad is named Charles. The new Pragger Wagger, of course! How very clever and ingenious! Did they think of all that for themselves?"

"I suppose so. Well—er—good-bye. Now then, chaps! Pick up the dogs!" Shooing his charges ahead of him, Mr. Colson managed to get them to the gate where the proprietor was waiting to see them off his land.

"Charming little fellows," said Phlox. "Where would they come from?"

"A school called Pelican House Academy, sir, about a mile and 'arf t'other side the village. It's new. House used to belong to the Farnham family, but they sold it last year and the school took over. But I thought you and the lady was with 'em."

"No, no. We met them along the road and were interested in their errand. We are keen amateurs of archæology ourselves."

"Oh, ah, be ee? Well, there'll be another lot along s'arternoon."

"From the same school?"

"Oh, no, sir. This other lot is from a convent school— young ladies in charge of the nuns."

"And do they propose to dig?"

"Well, so the Reverend Mother said in her letter, sir, but if there's anything left to find, now that they young boys has had a go, I'd be hard put to it to say what it might be."

"I should be most interested to see your own finds. Would you permit . . .?"

"Well, if you be staying with vicar, sir, p'raps he'd bring ee along."

"I quite understand. He will vouch for us, of course. Yes, yes, I quite take your point. One further favour, then. At what time do you expect the girls' school to get here?"

"Not before 'arf-past three, sir."

"Well, now, if we get back here by that time or a little later, may we come and watch their efforts? It may be that these will prove to be a little more scientific than those of the small boys."

"Ah, if they'll have you. Don't make no difference to me."

"Good. We'll go for a short walk, then, and make our arrangements later on with the farmer for spending the night in his barn . . ."

"You said you was friends of the vicar."

"So we are, so we are. But his guest-rooms are full at the moment."

"Folks as stays at the rectory don't generally get putting up for the night in barns."

"Be that as it may, we look forward to seeing you here again at about half-past three, then."

“Be that as it may,” repeated the smallholder to himself as he regarded their retreating backs, “I don’t make head nor tail of you two customers, blowed if I do. Still . . .” he looked at the ten-shilling note which Phlox had left in his hand . . . “I do suppose you’re just a couple of ‘armless Londoners. Oh, well, it takes all sorts to make a world.”

Phlox and Marigold caught up the convent contingent that afternoon just as the girls (and the two nuns who accompanied the party) reached the smallholding. They followed and, having obtained permission from the nuns to do so, they sat down to watch the girls at work. The nuns did not take part, but seated themselves on chairs brought by the smallholder and supervised the activities of their pupils. The girls were considerably older than the morning excavators, and worked, on the whole, quietly and with some attempt at science.

At the end of half an hour nothing of interest had come to light, and Marigold, at Phlox’s instigation, approached the Sisters and suggested that, if the girls would like to have a rest, she and her husband would be very pleased to go on with the work. The girls, however, declared that they were not in the least tired, so the Carmichaels continued to watch their efforts until Phlox, slightly bored, suggested that Marigold might go and converse with the nuns while he went and talked to the smallholder. Marigold, also bored, assented.

The nuns, silent with one another, joyously accepted the opportunity (which their Rule allowed) to talk to a stranger. Their names, in religion, it appeared, were Sister Mary Pontianus and Sister Mary Epiphanius. They were from the Convent of Saint Thomas Aquinas in the town of Bossbury and had come in by motor-coach—rather an expensive journey, Sister Mary Pontianus observed, since the whole of the coach had had to be booked for only eight people. They had left it at the village crossroads, where it could be parked in front of a garage. The girls had had to

pay for it. Coach journeys were, of course, an extra. She chatted on. The girls were called Dympna, Brigid, Clare, Agnes, Bernadine, and Elizabeth. The first three were Irish, Agnes was English, Elizabeth was an American, and Bernadine was French.

"We have them from all countries," said Sister Pontianus with modest self-congratulation.

"And what gave them this interest in archæology?"

"The local finds here, naturally, and then Father O'Canlon, our chaplain, is interested and has given lectures on how to dig."

"How disappointing for them if they find nothing."

"They will not be disappointed," said Sister Epiphanius. "If you remember, it has been said that to travel hopefully is better than to arrive, and in some respects that is very true."

"I am surprised to hear you quote Robert Louis Stevenson," said Marigold. "I would not have thought him a favourite with you. Of course, he spoke well of the Trappists at *Our Lady of the Snows*, but would you not regard him as a heretic?"

Sister Epiphanius smiled, but refused to answer the question. She said:

"Have you done very much digging? My brother helped dig in Syria last year. He found it very interesting and enjoyable."

"Your brother?" Marigold's voice was more shrill than she had intended. "I—forgive me, but—"

"But you do not connect us with brothers?"

"Well, I never think of nuns as being members of families, like ourselves."

"I have three brothers, one a priest, one a farmer, and one a doctor. Have you no brothers?"

"I—oh, yes, of course. He's a—he's in the Civil Service."

"How nice. So useful and unostentatious, isn't it? You must love him very dearly."

"Oh, yes. It would be wrong not to, wouldn't it?"

"I think family ties are very important," said the nun. "Dympna, dear, the sides of the trench must be quite vertical. You are not a terrier at a rat-hole, dear child."

"No, Mother. I don't think this is a very good tool. The more I excavate, the more the soil seems to fall in."

"Allow me, please, Sister," said Phlox. He took the shovel from the girl, cleared the trench and then, with a small spade which formed part of the girls' equipment, squared off the sides of the tidied-up hole and began to dig down deeper. "You may need to go down eight or nine feet," he said. "Actually, it isn't really a job for amateurs."

"Eight or nine feet sounds a formidable depth," said Sister Epiphanius. "We shall not have time for so much."

She drew out a small whistle, blew it, and gave the word to knock off. There was polite but definite protest.

"Oh, please, Sister, just another five minutes!"

"It would be awful if the very next people dug up something really interesting."

Sister Epiphanius laughed.

"You must not be selfish and envy others their triumphs," she said. The squad cleaned their tools with handfuls of hastily-pulled coarse grass and strolled off, chattering amiably, to the gate, where Marigold was now talking earnestly with the smallholder.

"But we adore living rough, don't we, Phlox?" she said, as the party reached them. "I was just telling Mr. Dickon here that if we can't get any other lodging while we are waiting for beds at the vicarage—"

Phlox laughed, and broke in hastily.

"Oh, you mean the farmer's barn? Oh, rather! Rather! *Much* more fun living rough. *Very* inspiring, the simple life, I think."

"Oh, lovely, lovely!" said Marigold. "We are true children of the wild, Mr. Dickon."

“Like the gippos, I do suppose,” said Dickon, “though, come to think on it, I doubt whether farmer ‘ud ‘ave ‘ee kippin’ down in ‘is barn!” He looked at Marigold. “Tell ee what. Barns is all very well for gents for a couple o’ nights, but they ent the place for a lady. Why don’t ee ketch up wi’ the nuns—they’m on’y just passed us while we bin a-talking—and ask for a bed at the convent? Wouldn’t cost ee nothen if ee didn’t want for to give. Give what you can afford, that be their motter. Real good people they are, though, o’ course, I’m Church myself, when I goes at all.”

“Why, what a splendid idea, Marigold!” exclaimed Phlox, with great enthusiasm. “Come! We’ll ask them at once. It will be far better for you than the barn.”

“But we’d never thought—” began Marigold.

“A splendid idea!” repeated Phlox. “After the Sisters at once, dear! I insist! After all, there is plenty of room in their motor-coach.”

CHAPTER THREE

The Enthusiasts

“I am, I confess, naturally inclined to that which misguided Zeal terms Superstition.”

Ibid (Section 3)

SIMON and Andrew, named not so much for the fishermen Apostles as after their respective maternal grandfathers, kicked stones all the way back to school. They were not reproved by Mr. Colson because he recognised the signs of disappointment and fatigue and knew that, at the age of ten years, frustration dims the sense of proportion.

The school lunch had not helped matters. It had consisted of shepherd's pie and carrots, followed by ginger stodge and a custard which, as Richard pointed out to the junior master in charge of the table, “jolly well hasn't cussed, sir.” However, there was not, at the time, much trouble, because the boys had been looking forward to the dig.

An indignation meeting was held in the form-room before Mr. Colson came in to take the last lesson of the afternoon. It was noisy and unconstructive and resolved itself, for practical purposes, into a reiterated statement that the excavation had been a rotten swindle and the lunch had been lousy. There were no dissenting voices, so that even the solace of argument was not present. The meeting

broke up unwillingly upon Mr. Colson's entrance and the grievances were referred to him.

"Sir, don't you think we were digging in the wrong place, sir?"

"Sir, it stands to reason, sir, that there *must* be more Roman things on Mr. Dickon's land than just a mouldy old pot and a mask." The boys had been told nothing about the silver coins, the headmaster being of the opinion that cupidity in his charges was not to be encouraged.

"Oh, I don't know," said Mr. Colson, who, privately, was as disappointed as the children that nothing had come of their enthusiastic toil, "it's all on the knees of the gods."

"Sir, what does that mean, sir?"

"Sir, could we go there again, sir? To do some more digging, sir?"

"Sir, I've got a big blister on my hand."

"I bet my blister's bigger than yours, Sysko."

"I bet you it jolly well isn't! Look, sir, isn't my blister bigger than Pragso's blister, sir?"

"Sir, I've got a jolly good idea, sir!"

"Swallow it, you ass!"

"No, honestly, it's an *awfully* good idea. Sir, couldn't we measure their blisters in metres in your maths lesson, sir? — to compare them, sir?"

"The metre, my dear friend Andrew," said Mr. Colson, "measures rather more than a yard."

"Oh, sir! Isn't Saintso an ass, sir!" Followed some ecstatic shoving and kicking which Mr. Colson ended by literally hurling the children into their seats.

"Mental arithmetic: number down to twenty," he said; and so, for him, the period wore on, but not unpleasantly, for his nervous system was in excellent order and he was, in a bear-like fashion, fond of his small boys. The day wore on for Simon, too. He had hinted darkly to Andrew that there was something in the wind and was enjoying his friend's efforts to get him to say what it was.

Andrew's curiosity was not satisfied until they were washing their hands before tea. They contrived to take longer than the others—not that this presented much difficulty, for tea was as popular with the little boys of Pelican House Academy as lunch had been the reverse—and then Andrew, ignoring the claims upon his conscience exerted by the headmaster's frequent allusions to the desirability of gentlemanly behaviour and the spirit of friendship, advanced threateningly with two very wet paper towels.

"Now tell, you silly louse, or I'll stuff these down your neck!"

"All *right*! I was going to tell you now, anyway!"

"All right. Go on, then."

"I *am* going on. You know the film show after tea?"

"Well?"

"We're not going to it."

"But it's a Space Thing, you ass!"

"We're sure to have seen it before. And I heard there's a geography one before it, all about growing rice, or some rot. Look, if we sit by Mr. Peters, we can easily get out. I can always get out of his lessons if I say I feel sick. I did once cat right out in front of him and he nearly catted himself. I've only got to feel sick in the beginning of the film, and all you need do is ask if you shall go out with me. He's sure to say you can, because otherwise he'll think he ought to come out with me himself, and then, if I *did* cat—only, of course, I shan't . . ."

"Dry up. What have we got to oil out of the film *for*?"

"To dig, you fool."

"Dig?"

"Oh, grow up! Everybody thinks we dug in the wrong beastly place. We're going to have another bash after tea."

"Tea! Gosh! Come on! Those vulturous cormorants at our table will have swiped everything, and it's fish-paste and damson jam day!"

After tea, the scheme for coming out of the film show worked like a charm owing to Simon's correct assessment of the queasiness of Mr. Peters' stomach, that erudite gentleman having ordered Simon, who had prepared the way by sketching out a few experimental but realistic retchings, not to stay upon the order of his going, but to "get out quick, you filthy little brute!"

It was still beautifully light when, armed with small gardening forks and a couple of trowels filched from the school shed, the two boys arrived at Dickon's smallholding. Simon had allotted himself the task of spokesman and Andrew, a stolid, loyal, dependable child, was under strict orders to remain silent unless it was necessary for him to corroborate his leader's words. These words were but lightly related to the truth.

"Mr. Colson wanted us to have one more bash, Mr. Dickon. He thought you wouldn't mind as long as we don't dig anywhere but just in the same corner. Is that all right?"

"I reckon so. You can't do no harm, as I knows on. Will you keep an eye on our Alfie? His mother wants to go up to the Stone 'Ouse to 'elp wi' the dinner. Dame Beatrice got a party on, or summat o' that. Mother can take the baby, but Alfie, 'e's an 'andful. 'Ow long you reckon to be 'ere?"

"About an hour, unless we find something really exciting, Mr. Dickon. Thanks a lot. Yes, we'll keep an eye on your little boy."

"Right, then. Alfie can bring his toy spade. It'll give un sommat to do. I'll be through with my little job I'm doin' in about 'arf an hour, so, if your master telled you to stay an hour, we'll all be suited."

The boys confidently and amiably took charge of Alfie, and soon all three were industriously flinging up the light, dry soil.

"How deep do you think we ought to go before we try another place?" asked Andrew, wiping a grimy hand across a face shining with perspiration.

"Mr. Colson says sometimes you have to go eight or nine feet down."

"Gosh!"

"But sometimes you find things a lot nearer the surface."

"I should jolly well hope so. I say, this looks like a grave, doesn't it?"

"Better put Alfie on to another place, in case he falls in."

"What about putting him in and letting him carry on while we try a new place? That'll keep him out of the way."

"Good idea. Alfie, you'd like to go into the big hole, wouldn't you? Perhaps you'll dig down to Australia."

Alfie, who was not in the least imaginative or nervous, took kindly to being dumped in the hole and told to go on digging. He was covered in soil from his light, Saxon hair to the soles of his stout little shoes, and was entirely, blissfully happy. He was fully occupied and felt extremely important. He was delighted to be working with older children, particularly as one of them had given him a fluff-covered sweet retrieved from the depths of a trousers' pocket.

Simon and Andrew doggedly began to dig in a spot a yard or two from the hole. After a bit, they tried another place and by the time Dickon took Alfie off their hands (to his intense and vociferous disgust) they had dug up an aggregate of at least forty square yards of the smallholding.

"I hope we haven't tried in too many places, and mucked up your garden," said Andrew. "We don't seem to have had any luck. How far down did you dig when you found the pot and the mask?"

"Oh, a matter of a couple o' spits, like. I believes in givin' this light stuff a right-down good turn over once every two years and a fork-over in between."

"Yes, I see. Well, we've gone down more than two spits, I think, haven't we, Sysko?"

"I'm beginning to think there isn't anything else to find," said Simon. "What do *you* think, Mr. Dickon?"

"I couldn't say, sir. You be welcome to go on tryin' if you want. It loosens the garden up and lets the air in, if no then else. 'ere's a bit o' cake for ee."

He nodded kindly and hauled Alfie off to help feed the pigs, an occupation which immediately stifled his son's protests. Then, the enormous hunks of caraway-seed cake having been consumed by the archæologists, these worked on in weary silence. As the church clock struck six they cleaned their tools with bits of stick, called out farewells and thanks, and trudged back to school. They were seated in the day-room, and the tools were back in the tool-shed, ten minutes before the rest of the school came out from the school hall in which the film had been shown.

"What was it like?" asked Simon.

"Lousy. Why, didn't you see it?"

"No. I told Mr. Peters I was going to cat and he chucked me out and Saintso came with me to make sure I was all right."

"And did you cat? I'm not surprised. I thought the potted meat at tea was absolutely *crawling*."

"No, I didn't cat. I knew I wouldn't. Anyway, I didn't have any potted meat because you silly cormorants had swallowed the lot before Saintso and I got a smell of it."

"Smell is right," said Charles, *alias* Pragso. "The filthy stuff absolutely *stank*. I'd write home about it, only I'm sure the beaks read all our letters, although they don't say they do. But when Mr. Colson asks me how I spell 'essential'—well, I know what to think, because I told my people, in my last letter but one, that it was absolutely essential I should have extra riding lessons so that they can safely buy me a much bigger pony for Christmas so that I can do them credit and my kid sister can have the present pony all to herself, because we share it, and I take a dim view of always having to groom it when it ought to be her job, because she has it all the time I'm at school and still wants it in the holidays."

"Kid sisters get everything," said Francis. "Anyway, you two lucky swine got out of seeing the film, did you?"

"What was wrong with it?"

"It wasn't a Space Thing at all. It was two mouldy old jogger films about the weather and about Egyptian cotton. It was absolutely lousy and I think we all ought to bounce you two on the dorm floor for getting out of it."

"Hear, hear!" said several voices.

"Shut up, you silly maggots," said Andrew. "It isn't as though we had any fun."

"Why, what did you do?"

"Tell you after lights out, when Mr. Peters has made his rounds. But no bouncing, mind."

He recounted the short and simple story, as he had promised.

"And there really wasn't anything else there?" asked a voice, identifiable as that of Francis, out of the darkness.

"Not a single sausage. We dug up most of the garden. It was a bally swindle."

"Serve you right."

"O.K. O.K. O.K."

"Well, one thing, we needn't sweat to get Mr. Colson to take the rest of us over there anymore. But are you sure you *really* dug up the place?"

"Yes, of course we're sure. Grow up! There wasn't a thing."

"I say," said Charles, "you don't think Mr. Dickon *planted* the stuff himself and then *pretended* he'd dug it up, do you?"

"Why should he do that? Don't be a fool," said Andrew.

"To get in the papers, you ass."

"I say!" said Simon, "Could *be*!"

The dormitory settled down, but the subject was resumed on the following day in rather different form.

"You know," said Richard, speaking in his unemotional way, "I keep wondering about that man in sandals and that

woman in the floppy dress. The man who mended Sysko's shoe, I mean."

"What about him?" demanded Simon. "It was jolly decent of him to stick the heel on again."

"Yes, but why did he come on to the farm?"

"It isn't a farm, you fool. It's just a smallholding. Don't you know the difference?"

"A sort of croft," explained Andrew, who came from the west of Scotland.

"Of course I know the difference. What do names matter? Mr. Colson says Shakespeare didn't think they did. He couldn't even spell his own."

"Oh, dry up about Shakespeare. We all know you're going to be Oberon, so *what?*"

"I'm only saying . . . and, anyway, it was Juliet who said about a rose and all that. My sister was it in the R.A.D.A. play, so what?"

"Oh, let's get on with it. Get on, Chardso, and make it snappy."

"It's nothing, really," said Richard. "I thought they were suspicious characters."

"Oh, phooey! I expect they came from an art colony or something."

"They might be nudists."

"You can't be a nudist if you wear clothes."

"You have to wear clothes outside a nudist camp. The police would jolly soon haul you in if you didn't."

"I expect they just eat carrots and things."

"Carrots are jolly good for you. You don't get spots if you eat them."

"Why don't you eat some, then?"

"Oh, do dry up! Chardso's got the attention of the House."

"Funny ass!"

"What House?"

"It's what Mr. Colson says when we have a debate. Now, then, shut up and listen. Go on, Chardso."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't. They remind me of something, and I don't know what it is."

"Well!" exclaimed Simon in disgust. "If *that's* all you can say! Let's bump him for wasting our time!"

The subsequent proceedings were interrupted by the entrance of Mr. Peters, his youthful chin stuck out in uncompromising wrath. He fastened a pincer-grip upon the right and left ears respectively of Simon and Andrew.

"To the headmaster, you little headaches! Quick march!" he said.

Both boys squealed automatically.

"Sir, we haven't done anything, sir!" protested Simon.

"Not a bally single thing, sir," said Andrew.

"No?" Mr. Peters smiled sardonically, released the two ears but wound a massive and thoughtful hand in each boy's hair. "What about cutting the film show last night?"

"Cutting it, sir? But, sir, I *asked* you if I could go out."

"And you said I could go with him, sir."

"Are you really taking us to the headmaster, sir?" asked Simon. "Because, well, won't he wonder why you didn't take me to Matron or something when I told you I was going to be sick?"

Mr. Peters released them.

"You win, you little horrors," he said. "Now tell me what you got up to."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Grisly Occupant

“Where I cannot satisfy my reason, I love to
humour my fancy.”

Ibid (Section 10)

“THEY can have me, they think,” said Marigold, who had run after the nuns, walked with them some distance along the road and then returned, at a kind of lolloping gallop, to the smallholder’s gate, “but they’ve got to ask somebody called Reverend Mother.”

“Of course,” said Phlox. “But it will be all right. Your light luggage will see you through for a couple of nights, will it not?”

“Oh, yes. But—are you sure? I hate to desert you.”

“Perfectly sure. I shall feel free then to join in the joviality tonight at the village inn. Who knows?—I may pick up something quite new in the way of folklore; something quite fascinating and Cecil Sharp, you know. I should not care to introduce *you* to the bucolic stares and rustic jesting of the local peasants, so I shall be happier, for once, on my own.”

“Of course, if you say so,” agreed the meek Marigold. “How shall I get my light luggage from Bossbury station without the aid of the vicar’s car?—Oh, and what will you do

if the farmer can't put you up? You really can't sleep in a barn!"

"I shall contrive something, never fear. As for the luggage, we will go to the station as soon as we know for certain that you will be received at the convent and then the station cab can transport both yourself and your bag. So let us trot along and catch up with your party again and I will accompany you in their motor-coach and then wait for you in the station booking hall."

This programme was carried out. Phlox and Marigold literally trotted along to join the nuns and accompany them to the convent, and Marigold rejoined Phlox some two and a half hours later.

"They *would* have me stay to tea," she explained. "At least, they *gave* me tea. One doesn't eat with them, but in a small private room called, quaintly, the parlour. After this, I am to stay in the guest-house."

"Will they provide you with accommodation for three nights, then?"

"Willingly. And with all meals. May I have some money? What ought I to give them?"

"Anything which your generosity suggests, my dear. Here is the wallet I have been taking care of for you. It is, after all, your own, to do with as you will. Be lavish rather than parsimonious. They are rendering us a great and necessary service. Oh, by the way, it might be as well not to let our good friend Pierce know that you have accepted the hospitality of another Church. He appears to be a broadminded man—indeed, I think he is, or he would hardly add to his stipend, inadequate though it must be, by taking in paying guests—but it might irk him to think that, because he is not able to house us just at present, he has driven you into the arms of the Scarlet Woman. You understand me?"

"Perfectly, dear. I would not for one moment hurt his feelings."

"That's splendid, then," said Phlox. He saw no more of her until he met her at the convent gate after lunch on the following Saturday, when he went with her to the vicarage. They were given the welcome always accorded to guests by Veronica Pierce, whether she liked them or not, were informed that the vicar was "on his rounds" but would be in for tea, and were shown to their separate rooms.

The talk at tea was vivacious. The Carmichaels were asked their future plans, for the vicar found interest in their multifarious interests and activities and his wife a sardonic amusement.

"Well, we have not really *planned* yet," said Phlox. "After we have finished here and done the cave paintings, I had thought of doing a winter thing in Egypt and the next summer's one over here."

"I'd thought of crop-marks in Wiltshire for the summer one," said Marigold.

"Why, so had I, my dear. How very strange!"

"And the temple at Abu Simbel for this winter."

"Oh, the great rock-temple of the nineteenth dynasty! Yes, that would be very nice. I myself had thought of the temple of Khonsu. We had but a very cursory glance at it when we did Karnak, if you remember."

"I do remember. Of course we'll do Khonsu, if you prefer it."

"No, no. Abu Simbel is older and more interesting." He turned to Veronica. "How she does love her Colossi," he said, with a kind and indulgent smile.

"And how she does kow-tow to *you*," thought Veronica, by whom this attitude in a woman was deeply resented, unaware that it was her own attitude to her husband. "I haven't been to Egypt, so I can't arbitrate," she said aloud. "By the way, as it turned out, you could have come a few days earlier, if we'd known. Our guest went off on Wednesday instead of today. Too bad we couldn't let you know sooner, but we didn't know ourselves until Wednesday

afternoon, and then it didn't seem worthwhile to bother you, as you couldn't have received our letter until Thursday. Even so, I suppose it means you might have had a couple more days down here."

Marigold met Phlox's eye. He gave a slight shake of the head. She sighed almost inaudibly but made no mention of the convent. Phlox smiled approvingly and said:

"Well, reverting to our little discussion, you know, dear people, I don't feel that you can have *lived* if you haven't seen Egypt. There is something about it that is quite unlike anything else in the world. It is an *experience*."

"So is being in a motor-car smash," said Veronica.

"Nevertheless," said Marigold, rallying to the defence of her senior partner, "you really should go to Egypt, even if only once."

"Oh, but you should! Indeed you should," said Phlox earnestly. The vicar thought it time to steer the conversation into channels nearer home. He suggested that he should get out his car on the Monday and take Phlox and Marigold to the Beaulieu road so that they could attempt to trace from there the course of the Roman road which, he was convinced, ran very near to the village of Wandles Parva.

"Although, now I come to think of it," went on Mr. Pierce, "I don't see why we shouldn't call upon Dickon—oh, you haven't seen our local finds!—and begin from where he made his discoveries."

"Well, we *did* go over there, you know, and, really," said Phlox, "I hardly think that there is anything to be gained, Vicar, by doing that. If you had seen, as we saw, the tremendous excavations which were carried out by the small boys and the tall girls, I cannot believe you would imagine that anything else could be found there."

"Nevertheless," said the vicar; and nevertheless it was. By twelve noon on the Monday he and his guests were surveying the results of the herculean labours of Sysko and Saintso.

"Well," said the vicar, "it would not be difficult to dig a little deeper, I imagine. The little fellows have been at it like terriers. Get us a spade and shovel, Dickon. Come, my dear Carmichael, off with your jacket. Perhaps Mrs. Carmichael will hold it for you, as I see that it is of shantung silk. My own vestment will do very well on this bush."

The first indication that there was a body buried in the smallholding was when the vicar unearthed the skeleton of a hand. Feverish but careful excavation soon revealed the rest of the body, and by sunset the complete cadaver lay out by the chicken run.

Excitement was intense, although the vicar, shaking his head, declared that the body could not be that of a Roman.

"Wrong sort of burial altogether," he said. Phlox demurred.

"Have you seen how the skull is split, padre? How about a Saxon raid? We are not so far from the coast. Century six, let us say. The Roman troops have been withdrawn and the Roman coast defences from the Wash round to Porchester left unmanned. Is it far-fetched to postulate a Saxon invasion? What about Hengist and Horsa? They are said to have landed not so far from here. And then, the legendary Arthur? What about *him*?"

Reluctantly the vicar conceded the point. It was left to Dickon to introduce the practical note.

"I do suppose this be a job for the police."

"The police?" Phlox looked surprised.

"This here body," pursued the smallholder, "be a dead body. A corpse, as you might say. Corpses be the business of the police, if they come by their end suspicious. What be more suspicious than a splitted-open yead? Look you 'ere."

"But, my good chap," said Phlox, "this body is that of a man who died at least fourteen hundred years ago."

"'E be a corpus, beant'e?"

"In any case," said Marigold, "the village constable is unlikely to be interested. What do you say, Mr. Pierce?"

"One thing is clear," said the vicar. "The poor man, whoever he is, cannot have received Christian burial, and yet, if he lived as late as the sixth century and was a Roman Briton killed by Saxon raiders, he is almost certain to have been a Christian."

"Well," said Dickon, "with best respects, sir, I don't want him a-laying out all naked and onashamed on my smallholding. Did we ought to put him into a shed or sommat?"

"An excellent idea," said the vicar. "Will you—er—can you arrange that?"

"Ah. I don't want my wife or the little uns seeing him. Give 'em a turn, it would. Sooner we gets him stowed away, the better."

When the skeleton, singularly intact, although somewhat short of teeth, had been disposed of and the shed door locked, Phlox, slightly hysterically, said that he wanted to wash. Dickon took him towards the house and its primitive conveniences of pump and earth-closet. Marigold, left to make conversation to the vicar, said tentatively:

"I think there was a good deal in what Phlox said, you know."

"About what?" the vicar enquired.

"Why, that this poor man was killed in a Saxon raid and his things buried with him. I read some time ago about a Saxon cemetery excavated at a place called Marina Drive, in Dunstable. There were pictures in the local paper. There was one skeleton in particular, not unlike this one, from what I remember of the photograph . . ."

"I don't *really* see any connection between a skeleton dug up in a Saxon cemetery at Dunstable and this supposedly Roman-British skeleton here."

"Oh, but I meant about the *depth* and the *manner* of the burial."

"Yes?"

"I obtained access to the interim report of the Manshead Archæological Society of Dunstable—Phlox and I are so *interested* in archæology, you know—and it stated that the finds were made along the Icknield Way, one mile to the west of the Watling Street crossing."*

"Oh, really?"

"Oh, yes. And what is more . . ." she lowered her voice dramatically . . . "*what is more*, Mr. Pierce, a Roman villa had been discovered by the same society in the village of Totternhoe, near enough to be overlooked from the higher ground (as I understood it) occupied by the cemetery."

"But there must have been dozens of Roman villas allowed to fall into decay after the arrival of the Saxons, dear lady. I find nothing very impressive about what you tell me."

"Oh, but, dear Mr. Pierce, what about the rest of the story?"

"What *is* the rest of the story?"

"How these Saxons were buried. Do you know that they were found only about a foot down into the chalk of the Chiltern Hills, with just a few inches of soil on top? Doesn't *that* prove what Phlox says? Of course, the particular skeleton which was pictured in the paper happened to be that of a woman, but I don't really see that it makes very much difference. The society found thirty-five graves and no trace of coffins. It seems to me that *everything* is proved."

"If anything is proved, it seems to be that our skeleton is more likely to be Anglo-Saxon than Roman."

"Oh, but, in that case, *what* becomes of Dickon's *pot* and *mask* that Veronica told us about?"

The vicar did not reply, except to nod in a ruminating manner, for Phlox rejoined them.

"Well, now," he said, "what is your purpose, vicar? Are we to pursue our researches by car?"

"I believe we had better pursue lunch," said Mr. Pierce, looking at his watch. "Dear me, I had no idea it was so late. We had better get back at once. Was there," he enquired of Marigold, "an inquest on those Saxon finds?"

"I have no idea, but I shouldn't think so," she replied.

"Ah," said the vicar vaguely. "Well, we must see. Now, the car, and something for the inner man. I *believe* we are promised sole and a roast."

For the space of two nights and a day the vicar of Wandles considered the case of the skeleton. To hold an inquest on it seemed to him rather ridiculous; to give it Christian burial, since nothing could ever be known of its religious convictions, open to grave objection. He consulted his wife. Then he decided to call upon Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley at the Stone House. She, as he very well knew, had had considerable experience of defunct persons and was consulting psychiatrist to the Home Office. Unfortunately, when he called, he was told by the housekeeper that Dame Beatrice had gone to her London clinic and it was not known when she would return to Wandles Parva.

Unable to obtain guidance, he wondered whether he ought to speak to the Bishop. It might be the wisest course, he decided. Unfortunately the Bishop was on holiday in Madeira. It was with a feeling of considerable relief, therefore, that, upon going back to the smallholding, he learned that the matter had been lifted entirely out of his hands. The skeleton had been loaned by Dickon to the Pelican House Academy and was the pride and joy of that small, select preparatory school. It had been cleaned up, disinfected and placed in the school library, flanked on the left by a tooth reputed to be that of a woolly rhinoceros and on the right by a cast of Rodin's *Thinker*.

In this environment it remained undisturbed (except by some boy or boys unknown who patriotically embellished it with a school cap belonging to a harmless, innocent child

who had come from South America that term and could not be held in any way responsible for the purloining of his headgear) until Dame Beatrice and her secretary returned to the Stone House some days later.

It was Laura who heard the news about the skeleton. She had several friends among the small boys. She met Sysko and Saintso as they returned from an expedition to the Rufus Stone in the New Forest.

"Hullo," she said. "What's the news along the Potomac?"

"Caesar's ghost," said Simon. "We've got a sheeted dead."

"A how-much?"

"Oh, *you* know, Mrs. Gavin. A body."

"In what sense?"

"You mean *tense*," said Andrew, giggling. "I say!" He smote Simon delightedly on the back. "Did you hear what I said, Sysko? I said . . ."

"Yes, I heard you, you funny idiot. All the same, he really does mean that," he explained to Laura. "You see, it's a Roman skeleton. It was found on the Roman dig. Mr. Dickon offered it and Mr. Colson bagged it for us. It's in the library at school. It's a terrific zoom having it, but everybody is as sick as mud that we didn't find it ourselves. We easily might have done."

"As how?"

"Well, we dug and scooped and sweated for simply *hours* and didn't find a thing, and then Saintso and I went on our own and didn't find a thing, either. Then that man who put the heel on my shoe dug it up with just simply a flick of the trowel."

"Hard cheese."

"All we're hoping now is that it will *walk*."

"Walk?"

"Old Pragso got into a talking-point with Mr. Brooker for pretending it *did*, and frightening a kid named Gosport into

a fit in the dorm last night. Mr. Brooker threatened to Jimmy Edwards anybody else who talked about ghosts after lights. That wouldn't matter so much, but he said he'll send Julius Caesar to the town museum if it happens again and he's rather apt to keep his word when it's things like that. Anyway, he's now gone and locked poor old Caesar up."

"I don't see," said Laura, when she was back at the Stone House and in the presence of her yellow-skinned, black-haired, elderly employer, "how on earth those kids could have missed the skeleton if their story of the afternoon they spent digging up Dickon's place is true. I had a most detailed and picturesque account of their activities from Sysko and Saintso, otherwise Simon Prynne and Andrew Coustie, as I walked along the road with them just now."

"Interesting," said Dame Beatrice. "I should like to see this exhibit. It might be a good idea to write to the headmaster and request permission to call at the school and inspect it. The skeleton of a Roman who has received cursory burial should be a matter of public interest."

"Right. I'll see to it at once. Do I accompany you?"

"By all means."

"I wonder what the fascination is about human bones?" said Laura thoughtfully. "You'd think people would recoil from them in horror, whereas most people, given the opportunity, will goggle at them for hours on end. I remember being taken to the Egyptian galleries at the B.M. when I was of tender years, and the only thing I really cared about was that repulsive leathery-looking thing lying in a sort of a bath . . ."

"Your impression of it seems a trifle vague," said Dame Beatrice.

Dame Beatrice visited the school library alone, as it turned out, because Laura's husband, Detective Chief-Inspector

Robert Gavin of the C.I.D., having no outstanding case on hand to engage his interest, had obtained some leave which was owing to him and had taken his wife and small son to his home in Scotland for a fortnight.

Mr. Eustace Brooker, M.C., M.A., B.Sc., the headmaster, well aware that his visitor, except for her lack of military distinction, was considerably more eminent than himself, met her upon arrival and conducted her personally on a tour of the school. The library he reserved until she had seen the playing fields, the indoor swimming bath, the gymnasium (complete with showers), the dormitories, the woodwork centre, the gardening shed, the assembly hall (complete with stage), and the new sanatorium (complete with one patient who had blown off some of his hair, disobediently, in the chemistry lab).

The library proved to be a sizeable room with alcoves for bookshelves and tables, the statue and the tooth, a six-inch Ordnance map of the district, a newspaper and magazine rack, and a large photograph of the Acropolis at Athens. The skeleton was in a cupboard which the headmaster had to unlock. As he explained, one never knew, with boys, what might happen on the fifth of November and that, with any luck, after the initial excitement had died down, out of sight would be out of mind.

Dame Beatrice examined the specimen of deprived humanity in silence. Then, when it had been locked up again, she said:

“It’s female, of course.”

“Really?” If it had been alive and pulchritudinous the headmaster could scarcely have looked more nonplussed. “I had never thought of that!”

“Moreover,” continued Dame Beatrice, “I am not at all satisfied that it is Roman. One could not be definite until the necessary tests had been made, but I should say that it is of

considerably later date than even the sixteenth, let alone the sixth, century."

"You astound me. Even so . . ."

"Quite. You see, it could be modern."

"Buried in a smallholding? And what about the split in the skull? You don't mean . . .?"

"It is not my business, of course."

"But you are suggesting . . .?"

"Yes, I fear that I am."

"What on earth can I say to the boys if what you infer turns out to be the truth?"

"Let us hope that I am wrong."

"You're a doctor," said the headmaster slowly. "I shan't rest until I am satisfied about this. How truly horrible!"

"Yes, murder *is* truly horrible. You will be wishing that I had never come here."

"No . . . oh, not at all. As a citizen . . ." His voice tailed off, then functioned again, but on a different note. "Yes, boy? What is it?"

"Mr. Tallboy asked me to tell you that the new taperecorder has come, sir, and it needs a signature before the man can leave it."

"Oh, very well, I'll come. Excuse me one moment, Dame Beatrice . . . There's always something!"

He hurried away towards the door which the boy held open. It closed behind the pair of them. Dame Beatrice, who had noticed that the headmaster had left the key (one of a formidable bunch too heavy to be trousered) on top of a nearby table, reopened the resting-place of the suspect cadaver and subjected the bones to keen scrutiny. By the time Mr. Brooker returned, the cupboard was locked up again, the keys were where he had left them and Dame Beatrice was inspecting the books on the library shelves.

"Of course," he said, this time in a brisk and business-like tone, "there is no certainty whatever that the skeleton is that of a Roman. It is extremely interesting that one should

jump to these conclusions owing merely to an association of ideas. Dickon finds evidence of Roman occupation on his land; very close to where he makes this discovery a skeleton is unearthed, and so everybody connects the bones with the previous finds. It is almost frightening to think how easily one may be hoodwinked and misled. And, you know, Dame Beatrice, another thought comes into my mind."

"I imagined that it might."

"This skeleton may not have been there when my boys did their digging under the supervision of Mr. Colson, the history master. I know my boys and I cannot help thinking that, if there was a skeleton to be found, they would have found it. I should wish to visit this man Dickon forthwith and question him closely. Would you care—have you time—to accompany me?"

"I should like it above all things. My car is just outside and my chauffeur knows the way."

Dickon, Dame Beatrice noted, was not overjoyed to see them. He greeted with a surly grunt the headmaster's request to be allowed to inspect the site where the boys had done their digging, but he led the way to it. Arrived on the site he stood scowling thoughtfully at it and then said abruptly:

"You better take the other things off my hands. I don't fancy having things in the house as have laid beside a dead man."

"What things?" the headmaster enquired. "You don't mean your finds?"

"Ah. Some bits of money and a pot and a rare ugly old mask. When you've done here you might care to walk up to the 'ouse and take a look at 'em."

"Why, that's very good of you," said Mr. Brooker. "I should like them above all things for the school library and museum if you feel like parting with them—that is, if they are genuine, as I feel sure they are."

"I reckon *they're* genuine all right."

“What do you mean, Dickon?” The headmaster exchanged glances with Dame Beatrice. “Why the emphasis?”

“I bin turning over that there skelington in my yead, sir, and I dunno as I likes the look of it.”

“In what sense, man?”

Dickon sketched a gesture towards the disturbed ground which he had tidied over but which still showed signs of archæological research.

“When I thinks,” he said impressively, adding weight to his words by making a dramatic pause in order to spit at a slug, “when I recollects of how them boys of yours—yes, and their master, too—goed to all that strenuous work and then how the young ladies as the nuns brought along done their digging as well, and then when they other two young shavers comed ‘ere, I don’t see—that I do *not*—how that there skelington could of laid there without bein’ found. And if it weren’t found, I says to myself, figuring of it out, if it *weren’t* found, it were for a very good reason.”

“The boys and girls did not dig in the right place,” said Mr. Brooker hastily. Dickon fixed him with a ruminative eye.

“It weren’t *found* because it weren’t there to *be* found, Mr. Brooker, sir. And if it weren’t there to be found when your boys and the young convent ladies done that there digging, then somebody—what the perlice calls person or persons onknowed—must of put it there to *be* found.”

“Relentless logic, Dickon,” Dame Beatrice observed, leering at the thinker. “Strangely enough, Mr. Brooker and I came to the same conclusion and that is why we are here. Will you point out the exact place in which the skeleton lay?”

The man indicated the spot and then asked:

“Will I be liable to the police for having a skelington on my land?”

“If it is a modern skeleton, as we are beginning to think that it is,” Dame Beatrice replied, “they will be here to

question you, but, unless you dumped it here yourself, there is nothing for you to fear except the temporary inconvenience of their presence."

"I dunno, mam. Interfering sort of old nosey parkers, some of 'em be. Tain't likely to be Tom Parkin, down the village, you see. I reckon it'll be some of that lot as come here from Culminster in the war to see what I was a-doin' wi' my pig-meat. Ah, and I reckon as how a dead man mought raise a domn sight more questions than a killed pig."

"Possibly," agreed Mr. Brooker, to whom the last remark seemed to be addressed. He appeared to be preoccupied.

"It happens to be the skeleton of a woman," remarked Dame Beatrice. "So much was evident to me when I examined it."

"A woman? Be you certain sure, mam?" demanded the smallholder.

"Dame Beatrice, among other honours, holds the degree of Doctor of Medicine," Mr. Brooker pointed out, adding immediately, "A woman! Well, of all things!"—a disingenuous observation which did not escape the notice of Dame Beatrice.

"Whose skull was split by a heavy implement or tool, possibly of agricultural origin, such as a slasher," she added.

"You don't accuse me of using a slasher on some poor woman, mam?"

"Do you possess a slasher?"

"You *must* keep your 'edges trimmed up."

"Let me see it, please."

Her tone of authority was such that Dickon did not show the slightest resentment. He went off, without a word, and returned in less than ten minutes with the heavy, sharp implement. Dame Beatrice fished out a pocket magnifying glass and then, with a gloved hand, took the slasher from him. After a silence, during which Dickon seemed not to breathe, she handed it back with the remark:

“Has anyone borrowed it within the past four or five years?”

“Not onless mother lended it out without my knowledge, mam, and that’s a most unlikely thing. I’ve never knowed her lend out my tools. Have something to say if I ketch her at it.”

Dame Beatrice and Mr. Brooker returned to the school.

“A slasher?” said the headmaster. “Good heavens! Did you notice,” he added, “that, by implication, two of my boys dug up the site on their own initiative?”

“They are hardly likely to have planted a corpse there, you know,” Dame Beatrice observed, with the leer which often served her instead of a smile. “And the slasher appears to be guiltless of human gore.”

“Quite. A bit of investigation is indicated, though, I fancy. Let me see . . . if my memory serves me, it was Mr. Colson’s form who went to Dickon’s place to dig. Mr. Colson’s form . . . yes. Let us see what light he can throw on matters, shall we?”

Mr. Colson could throw no light on matters at all, for Mr. Peters was staunch and, having put himself in a position where he could be blackmailed, had kept faith with Simon and Andrew and had allowed their sin to revert to the limbo which had sponsored it.

The headmaster, however, was experienced and tenacious. He sent for the form, boy by boy, to the consternation of the young and the annoyance of their form-master, who, although he occasionally bullied them for their good and for the sake of preserving law and order, had that other attribute of the trained sheep-dog, a real sense of the dignity and righteousness of his work. More humanly speaking, he did not hesitate to revile and castigate his boys in the privacy of the form-room, but he had the strongest objection to anyone else criticising or punishing them.

The headmaster, he reflected gloomily, surveying the uneasy expressions on the unfurrowed faces before him, as boy after boy was sent for and came back to sit in deathly silence, was within his rights, he supposed, in tracking some miscreant down, but he could not help hoping that the enquiry, whatever it was concerned with, would come to a dead end.

As it happened, only about half of the form had been sent for when the headmaster came into the form-room. He inspected the serious faces.

"Stand up, any boy who missed the last film show."

Neither Andrew nor Simon, so far, had been sent for. Both, after an agonised glance at the other, stood up.

"There seems to be a conspiracy of silence on a matter of some importance," went on the headmaster. "Come to my room, you two." He swept out, in all the dignity of his gown and hood, but the wretched children following him caught the heartening whisper of the young Charles as they passed the end desk in the front row:

"Stick it out! Nobody ratted,"

"What was that, Charles?" asked Mr. Colson, as soon as the form-room door was shut.

"Please, sir, nothing, sir."

"*Who* ratted?"

"Please, sir, nobody, sir."

"What was there to rat about? I suppose Andrew and Simon went off on a toot instead of attending the film show?"

"Well, sir," said Raymond, "Mr. Peters knows about it, sir, so I don't think there can be trouble, sir."

"Mr. Peters?"

"Oh, yes, sir," said several voices, simultaneously. "Mr. Peters knows *all* about it, sir, so it's bound to be quite all right, sir."

"Hm!" said Mr. Colson, who knew that Mr. Peters' lack of experience was apt to make him as clay in the hands of the

inevitably unscrupulous young. “Oh, does he, indeed! Well, open your books and read the third chapter. Expect questions—everybody!”

“*Written* answers, sir?”

“Written answers and no hornswoggling.”

In Mr. Brooker’s room, Sysko and Saintso found an old friend, Dame Beatrice of the Stone House. She leered lovingly at them.

“So these are the arch-detectives,” she said.

“Attend to Dame Beatrice, and be sure to answer her fully,” Mr. Brooker commanded them. “There may be no reason to punish you, but you must satisfy her completely—completely, mind!”

Having said this, he nodded sternly at them, went out, and closed the door.

“So there was no skeleton at the feast,” said Dame Beatrice.

“It wasn’t so much a feast—seed cake, in fact. Jolly good, though,” said Simon.

“But no skeleton, no,” said Andrew. Dame Beatrice took them through the whole of the exploit.

“So you had formed your plan, and decided to take Andrew with you, before the last lesson, but you did not disclose the plan or issue the invitation until tea-time?” she said to Simon, at the end.

“That’s quite right, yes.”

“And you yourself went nowhere near Mr. Dickon’s land, once you had come away from it with Mr. Colson and the rest of your form, until you returned to it with Andrew on the afternoon of which we have been speaking?”

“Cross my heart I didn’t—no.”

“You have been of considerable assistance to my researches. Off you go. Here!” She produced a pound note. “Is that sufficient to provide extra calories for yourselves and your form-mates?”

Meanwhile Mr. Colson had buttonholed Mr. Peters as soon as both were relieved of their duties by the sound of the bell.

“Peters, you young ass,” said Mr. Colson, beginning genially as was his wont when he thought that perhaps he would be obliged to end on a rather different note, “what the devil d’you mean by suborning my form? The Man sent for them one by one just now, and they tell me that *you* know all about it. Come clean.”

“Why, yes, that’s about right, I suppose. What’s been found out? Am I to be matted?”

“I’ve no idea. Dish out the gen and I might be able to tell you.”

Mr. Peters dished out the gen.

“Golly!” said Mr. Colson, who could see as far through a plateglass window as the next man. “That blasted skeleton! Planted! And after the place had already been dug over! What do you know! Peters, my lad, this is big stuff. The village will be front-page news tomorrow!”

*Taken from the interim report of September, 1957. G.M.

CHAPTER FIVE

1950 plus—and All That

“. . .to confirm and establish our opinions, ‘tis best to argue with judgments below our own.”

Ibid (Section 6)

CONFIDENT that Dame Beatrice could extract from Simon and Andrew any information which they had in their possession, Mr. Brooker got out his car and again drove to Dickon’s smallholding.

Dickon was “down the pigs,” he was told by Mrs. Dickon who, at the moment, had no company but that of the baby and the dog. Alfie, in deadly terror (owing to his mother’s lurid descriptions of the life which awaited him at school), had fled to the outside privy as soon as he spotted the car, and had bolted himself inside it, thus failing to form one of Mr. Brooker’s audience.

The headmaster nodded, tickled the baby under the chin, received from her a bleak stare, thanked Mrs. Dickon, and strode down the narrow ribbon of trampled earth which the Dickons called a garden path and found his quarry smoking a ruminative pipe and leaning on the sty of his favourite sow.

Dickon removed the pipe, pushed back his hat—a gesture which could have conveyed either respect or embarrassment and which was, as it happened, a slightly

uneasy mixture of the two—and nodded a greeting. He was at no loss to guess the nature of the errand which had brought Mr. Brooker to the smallholding.

“More trouble about them there bones as Mr. Colson took away, I reckon, sir,” he said.

Mr. Brooker shook his head.

“Not more trouble; just the same trouble, Dickon,” he said. “But I’m afraid I have come to ask you a few questions.”

“Well, Mr. Brooker, sir, as I says before, what I looks at is this: was that there skelington a ancient monument, or was it honest ‘uman bones and of scientific interest, as you might say, to the police? That’s what I still wants to know, with all respect to Dame Beatrice and yourself.”

“An interesting point, Dickon. It is *most* interesting that you should have doubted from the first whether the skeleton was that of—shall we say?—a Roman Briton.”

“Stands to reason I should doubt it, Mr. Brooker, sir. As I says before, if they little lads of yourn and the young ladies from the convent and then they two boys what Mr. Colson sent along on their own—if they didn’t find yon skelington where vicar and ‘is London friends dug it up, well, what I says, again and again, is that that there skelington weren’t there to be found.”

“I quite agreed with you the first time, if you remember. But what follows?”

“What follows is that the skelington were planted ‘ere, *and I wants to know for why*. Vicar and them friends of his turns up when nobody could of expected them, I knows, but lookin’ for a road, ‘em was, not skelingtons. If your little lads were older, I’d feel inclined to think they done it for a joke.”

“I wonder,” said the headmaster, “whether it was the vicar or whether it was his guests who chose to dig here?”

“It were vicar. I be certain sure o’ that.”

“That is interesting. Have you any enemies, Dickon? Is there anybody who might wish to embarrass you, or even

harm you in any way?"

"Not as fur as I knows on. Keep meself pretty much to meself, I reckon, and the missus don't give no offence nowhere."

"You see, there doesn't seem the slightest reason to have buried the skeleton on your land if it was to be dug up and discovered so soon."

"I reckon whoever planted it on me never reckoned on vicar and his friends digging here again. That's why I said as how, if your boys had been older, and them knowing how much digging had been done a'ready . . ."

"Yes, yes, but, as you quite rightly point out, my boys are mere children."

"Of course, some of 'em is all of thirteen years, sir. One on 'em might 'ave a brother a medical stoddent or such . . ."

"I shall institute the most stringent enquiries, of course, but I am convinced in my own mind that no such thing has happened. I do take your point, though, that whoever buried the thing—the—er—the cadaver—could not have expected that the same piece of ground would be excavated again so soon. That was why I asked whether you had ill-wishers. It looks like somebody from the immediate locality, doesn't it?"

"Put like that, sir, it most certainly do."

"One more question, Dickon. The two boys who came here after tea that evening. Did you supervise them while they were here?"

"Can't say I did, sir. I understood they come with permission from the school, and I didn't see as they could do any 'arm, so I leaves my boy Alfie with 'em for part of the time, being as I were busy and the wife were out, and, when I come back 'ere, I took young Alfie orf to feed the pigs and left your two boys to get on as long as they wanted."

"May I speak to Alfred?"

"He's gone and locked himself in the closet, but I'll get him out if you warnt to speak to 'im."

Lurid threats brought a fearful and tearful Alfie to talk to Mr. Brooker, but there was nothing to be learned from him of anything having been dug up on the site by Simon and Andrew. Mr. Brooker returned to the house with Dickon to receive the mask and the pot which had been promised him. Having been given them, he gazed benevolently at the smallholder.

"I am delighted to have them for the school museum," he said. "At least, they're not bones, even if they're not genuine, you know."

"Bones!" said Dickon, in a sepulchral tone, "It's our framework, sir, is bones. 'The bare bones of an argyment,' they says. 'The bone of contention,' they says. 'Why make so many bones about it?' they says. 'Boney,' they calls Napoleon, although, so far as I am aweer, Napoleon was a well-covered man. 'Bone in my leg,' they says, when they don't want to stir their stumps to play with their kids. 'Bone to pick,' they says, when they intends to differ with ee and bring ee to book. Ah, there be no end—*no end*—to bones, sir."

"And you have 'boned' most of your sayings from common English usage, Dickon," said the headmaster, with a smile. "Your examples are most apt."

"'Let's 'ave the tongs and the bones,'" quoted Dickon, surprisingly. "I done William Shakespeare at school, sir. Bones! 'Of thy bones are corals made.'"

"Shall we go to my car and install my treasure trove?" asked Mr. Brooker, cutting short this flood of erudition. Dickon assented and the pottery was soon safely installed in the headmaster's car.

"And glad Mother 'ull be to be rid of the things, sir," said Dickon. "Soon as her heered o' that skelington, so soon her assured me as 'ow no good luck 'ud ever come of it. 'Mark my words,' 'er says, 'us can bid good-bye to all comfort and cheerfulness,' 'er says, 'for months, and maybe years,' 'er says."

“Dear, dear,” said Mr. Brooker. “Well, I must be on my way. My very good wishes to your wife and—er—thank you very much for the treasures.”

“‘Lay not up for yourself treasure on earth,’” said Dickon, to the departing car, thus proving that his ability for apt quotation extended further even than he had given evidence of it.

The headmaster drove back to school, placed the mask and the jar on his desk and took out a magnifying glass. The things probably were faked, he decided. The Italians were clever about such replicas. He had a rather nice little copy of a bronze lamp and his wife had a beautiful piece of wood inlaid with copies of the more polite frescoes at Pompeii. The fact that the mask and the jar were copies need not detract from their educational value, he decided. He rang for his secretary and ordered her to place them in a suitable position in the case devoted to *objets d’art* and to request the art master to letter a suitable description of them.

Dame Beatrice, meanwhile, had returned to the Stone House and was on the long-distance telephone to her secretary.

“Means an inquest and no end of fun and games for the police, I suppose,” said Laura. “Do you require my presence?”

“No, no, child. I thought you would like to be abreast of the local news, that is all.”

“Don’t ring off. I want to call Gavin. He’s sure to want to talk to you about it.”

Dame Beatrice confided to the operator that she wished to purchase another three minutes of post-office time and was pleased to hear the confident Scottish tones of Detective Chief-Inspector Robert Gavin.

“We’ll come back at once,” he said. “I love a busman’s holiday, and Laura would never get over it if I kept her out of the swim.”

He was as good as his word and motored himself, his wife, and his small son to Edinburgh, where they stayed the night, and then to York, where they stayed a second night, and so to London. In London he applied formally for an extension of leave and told the Assistant Commissioner, informally, of his reason for demanding it.

"Oh, that Hampshire case. The inquest was held yesterday. The County Police are calling us in. It's pretty clear that they don't want a long, tiresome job that, maybe, isn't their pigeon, anyway. I should think the skeleton was planted on them, you know. May have come from anywhere. There's no telling from where, at present. Look here, you can have the job, if you like. You're looking pale and tired!"

Gavin, who had spent almost all his time in Scotland in the open air, grinned cheerfully and said that perhaps a year or two in the New Forest would set him up again.

"A year or two—and then I doubt whether you'll be much further forward," said the Assistant Commissioner, frowning. "I don't like skeletons. Nothing but expert witnesses and doubtful timings. Be off with you. I'm busy."

Gavin thereupon took his wife and son out to lunch and then down to the Stone House at Wandles Parva. From the Stone House he drove alone to introduce himself to the Superintendent with whom he would be working on the case.

"Where are we?" he asked. The Superintendent grunted.

"Your guess is as good as mine," he said. "The medical evidence is all over the show. There's not much doubt but that the body is fairly recent; all the same, it could be anything up to twelve years old. It means tracing all the missing persons for the past ten or twelve years."

"Not much future in it, you think?"

"Well, I don't know, and that's a fact. You see, somebody planted that skeleton, that's clear enough. You don't tell me that those boys and the young convent ladies

and the two little devils who skipped school didn't find that skeleton if it was there to be found."

"So there should be something to go on," said Gavin. "Who planted it and why, for instance."

"It had got too hot in the other place where it was laid. Yes, we've got that to go on, I suppose. I can't see it helps much."

"What about the verdict at the inquest?"

Laura Gavin was asking much the same question of Dame Beatrice at the Stone House.

"Where on earth will the police start?" she enquired. "With Dickon, I suppose, as the thing was found on his land."

"The police," said Dame Beatrice, "have left Dickon both angry and alarmed. I have been to see him several times and there is no doubt that he believes they suspect that he knows a good deal more about the skeleton than he has told them."

"I shouldn't think he does. What do *you* think?"

"I am convinced that he knows nothing at all. His wife is extremely worried on his behalf and has begged me to do what I can to save him from persecution."

"I suppose having police about the place does seem like persecution. Poor old Dickon! What a shame! What about the vicar and those people who actually unearthed the thing?"

"I met the Reverend Mr. Pierce the other day. The Carmichaels are lodging at the vicarage as paying guests, you know. He said that they had given the police their account of the matter and that he did not think they were likely to be questioned further, so I expect they will soon return home."

"I expect the case will have to be written off as one of those unsolved mysteries. I mean . . . it isn't even as if you can *identify* a skeleton, is it?—and one that's been ten to twelve years dead!"

"It has not been dead for nearly as long as that. I had ample opportunity for examining it at Mr. Brooker's school and it is my opinion that the body had been exposed to the air since the murder except for its very brief interment in Dickon's soil."

"Oh, really? What difference does that make?"

"It means that the murder may have been committed less than two years ago. A body exposed to the air becomes a skeleton in from a year and a quarter to a year and a half. In water the time taken varies between two and a half and three years. It is only if the body is buried in ordinary soil that it takes as long as ten to twelve years to lose all flesh and sinew."

"Did the doctors who gave evidence at the inquest agree with you, do you think?"

"Oh, yes, certainly, but, of course, they were cautious."

"Do you think they'll ever find out what happened?"

"I have no idea."

"Are *we* going into this in a big way, at all?"

"I confess to a certain amount of interest in the cadaver, and, it follows, I think, in the people who discovered it, particularly Mr. and Mrs. Carmichael."

"So the wind sits in that quarter?"

"Dear me! You must not jump to conclusions of that sort!"

"Maybe not," said the unabashed Laura, "but a nod's as good as a wink!"

"Only to a blind horse, remember!"

She left Laura to digest this trenchant rejoinder and went to call upon the vicar. As it happened, Mr. Pierce was not at home, but this did not upset Dame Beatrice's plans. Mrs. Pierce, in some respects, might be a more willing collaborator than her husband. What Dame Beatrice wanted was all the information she could gather about the Carmichaels.

Mrs. Pierce proved to be co-operative.

"They're out again with Gascony, tracing his Roman road. They won't be back for hours. We can have a lovely long gossip," she said.

"Where do they come from?" asked Dame Beatrice.

"They live on a house-boat moored somewhere between Oxford and Reading. The address is Reading, anyhow—Pollarded Reach, Reading."

"They are a united couple?"

"They say so, and there seems no reason to disbelieve them. They seem to like the same things—*dilettante* kind of things, if you know what I mean. One year it's one thing and the next year something else. Nothing they do seems to have any roots to it. As soon as one of their interests looks like needing real research and a bit of scholarship, they drop it and take up something new."

"What do they do for a living?"

"Oh, nothing. They have money of their own. A pity, I think. I should like to see Phlox made to buckle to and make a do of something. By this time, though, I really doubt whether he is capable of tackling an honest job of work."

"You are not favourably impressed by the characters of the couple, I gather."

"It's envy that sways me, I daresay. I feel a certain amount of resentment when I compare my lot with theirs. I struggle against my feelings, but it's not much good. Of course, we can do with the money they pay when they come here, but I'd much rather have the sort of people who come here because it's quiet and they really need a holiday. I don't mind working myself to the bone for them, but I do grudge looking after Phlox and Marigold and seeing to their meals and shopping for them and helping Marlene make their beds."

"I can understand that, of course. How long have you known them?"

"This is the fourth time they've been here. I don't really know why they like it. They could afford to go to good hotels

and they are not a bit mean about money, I'll say that for them. I charge them well above my usual prices, and they know that, and still they come, roughly once in six months."

"What is your opinion of them?"

"I really don't know. They're polite and pleasant and, I must say, remarkably easily pleased. Never any complaints, and tons of compliments when they say good-bye. I couldn't possibly tell you why I dislike them so much—well, it isn't *them*, it's *him*."

"Does Mr. Pierce know how you feel?"

"No. If I told him he wouldn't have them here anymore and, as I've told you, they do pay well and we certainly can do with the money."

"Did they give any reason for wanting to dig on Dickon's smallholding?"

"Not to me. Actually, I believe it was Gascony's idea. He thought that there might be something more to find—his villa near his Roman road, most probably. I think his theories are pretty reasonable."

"Yes, so do I. Were the Carmichaels present when the girls from the convent school did the digging?"

"Oh, I'm sure they were. Why?"

"It seems that the skeleton must have been planted after the girls had left, and after those two little boys did some extra digging."

"There's no other conclusion to be arrived at, I would say. You mean that the Carmichaels planted the skeleton and then deliberately 'found' it? But that doesn't make sense. I can imagine that a guilty person or a guilty pair might *plant* it, but I can't imagine why they should dig it up again in front of witnesses. It could have remained in the ground for years. Ground that had already been dug over for Roman remains would remain undisturbed, wouldn't it?—oh, perhaps not on a smallholding, though."

"Well, there, you see, nobody can tell. I understand from Laura that the very first digging was done by Dickon

himself and that the object of it was to dislodge a badger. The Roman finds were fortuitous.”

“Yes, that’s true. You think there might have been more badgers?”

“No. I begin to think that the police are right to question Dickon very closely. As I say, I am convinced that the skeleton was buried on his smallholding after the boys, and then the girls, had dug in that particular place.”

“And that it might have been bad luck on Dickon that my husband and the Carmichaels decided to dig on almost the same spot?”

“Yes, but then again, Dickon could have refused them permission to dig if there was something he did not want discovered.”

“Oh, dear! It *is* a muddle!”

“Of course, there is always ‘person unknown,’ is there not?”

“But we *must* know whoever it is! It isn’t feasible that a perfect stranger used Dickon’s smallholding, and that part of it which had already been well dug over. It seems as though the Carmichaels can be washed right out of it, anyhow. They can hardly have brought a skeleton down here with them.”

“What are you going to do next?” asked Laura, when Dame Beatrice returned to the Stone House.

“I shall approach Mr. and Mrs. Carmichael and ask for a first-hand description of the unearthing of the skeleton.”

“How will that help? They’ll just say they dug it out, and that will be that.”

“One never knows. Something may come up which will be useful.”

“I wouldn’t like to bet on it. Do you want me to come with you to take notes?”

Dame Beatrice cackled.

“As you know, I have a prejudice in favour of making my own notes,” she said. As it turned out, she did not need to

go to see Phlox and Marigold: they came to see her, not in connection with the skeleton but in quest of psychiatric treatment for Phlox.

"The fact is," he said, "I'm suffering from hallucinations."

"Hallucinations? Of what kind?" asked Dame Beatrice, wondering whether archæology had palled and he was in quest of some new experience.

"I see things."

"Yes? Please sit down, Mr. Carmichael. Mrs. Carmichael, I wonder whether you would be kind enough to go with Mrs. Gavin into the adjoining room whilst we have our consultation?"

"I should wish to be present, Dame Beatrice. I understand Phlox and he likes my support."

"In that case, I fear . . ."

"No, no!" said Phlox, pettishly. "Do as you are asked, Marigold, please. I can manage quite well alone."

Marigold looked reproachfully at him.

"Just as you wish, dear," she said. "I thought I ought to be at hand in case Dame Beatrice needed any corroboration of what you say."

"No, I shall not need that," said Dame Beatrice briskly.

"Do you not settle your patients on a couch?" asked Phlox, when his wife had gone and the door had closed behind her and Laura.

"Sometimes; but not at the first consultation. Now, begin at the beginning, omitting nothing."

She seated herself at a table so that he presented his left profile to her.

"That's nice," said Phlox. "I thought you might gaze fixedly at me and attempt to bore into my brain."

"Oh, no. I would really prefer to turn my back on you so that you could talk merely as though you were soliloquising, but as I sometimes have patients who are potentially dangerous, I do just keep an eye on their movements. It

saves both of us from the final embarrassment of my having to ward off an attack."

"I assure you that I should never hurt a fly."

"Quite so. Now, take your time, Mr. Carmichael. When did these hallucinations begin, and under what circumstances?"

"They began after my wife and I returned from walking the Roman Wall."

"Hadrian's Wall?"

"Exactly. Hadrian's Wall. So why should I see the ghost of Calpurnia? Can you tell me that?"

"How do you know it is Calpurnia?"

"That's what she calls herself."

"Oh, she speaks to you, then?"

"Only to moan, and tell me her name, and then she concludes by telling me, 'Help, ho! They murder Caesar!' It's not at all pleasant, I assure you."

Dame Beatrice scribbled busily, aware that Phlox was watching her with a closeness and an intensity which suggested mental derangement. Suddenly he got up, came swiftly to the table, and stood looking over her shoulder.

"You won't be able to decipher what I write," she said equably, in an almost apologetic tone. "I have my own system of hieroglyphics."

"Ah!" He sighed, shook his head and sat down again. "I feared as much. The last psychiatrist I visited wrote in Polish, a language also beyond my grasp."

"You have attended a psychiatrist before, then?"

"Yes. The bombing during the war. My nerves, you know."

"I see. How were your nerves affected?"

"I kept seeing angels."

"Angels?"

"Yes, but they all had the swastika on their wings."

"Most interesting. May we now return to Hadrian's Wall?"

“Certainly. We had a charming time there, and came back—this applies particularly to my wife—full of things Roman-British.”

“Colchester oysters, do you mean? Surely not from Hadrian’s Wall!”

Phlox leapt up.

“Really, Dame Beatrice, if you’re going to joke about it,” he said, “I think I am wasting my time!”

“I entirely agree,” said Dame Beatrice amiably. “So let us have done with farce and come to the dramatic realities. What have you come to say to me?”

“Really, I don’t think I follow you.”

“In that case, there is nothing more to be said, unless we return to our sheep, which would seem to be these hallucinations of yours.”

“Yes, my angels.”

“With swastikas on their wings.”

“What do you make of them?”

“They almost make you seem like an enemy alien, do they not?”

“Yes,” Phlox soberly agreed. “I had thought of that. But it isn’t—wasn’t—true, you know. I was—I *am*—patriotic to the backbone. I just cannot account for the angels.”

“They are unaccountable beings, no doubt. Now, to the skeleton.”

“You force the issue!”

“And with reason. Now that you know the skeleton to be that of a woman killed within the past few years, do you not also know that you and your wife are high on the list of suspects?” This question was a mere gambit to test his reactions, and it had a surprising and (she thought) a suspicious sequel.

“That is what I have come about,” said Phlox. “I realise that the police suspect us of knowing more about the skeleton than we have said, and that’s where we want your help. Will you give it to us?”

"A question which astounds me." This was true.

"Why so? It is a simple enough proposition. I want you to be on our side in any subsequent enquiry. Do you promise?"

Dame Beatrice regarded him benignly.

"Let us return to your Nazi angels," she said. "What about some word associations? Relax, please, and, when I say a word, I want you to tell me the second word which comes into your mind."

"I am familiar with this technique. The second word which comes into my mind. Very well."

"Trainer."

"Cub."

"Cubist."

"Mathematics."

"Attica."

"Salon."

"Macedon."

"Russian salad."

"Saladin."

"Doctor."

"Tory Alexander."

"Hymn."

"Her."

There was a significant pause. Then Phlox said,
"Charwoman."

"Charmian."

"Egypt."

"Pyramid."

"Wall."

"By heaven, Holmes," said Dame Beatrice in a different tone, "this is wonderful. I can assure you, Mr. Carmichael, that you will see no angels, of whatever persuasion they may be, for years and years and years. Possibly never at all."

"Really!" exclaimed Phlox, opening his eyes. "That is really worth knowing! Am I—do you—that is to say—"

"Five guineas, please."

"Eh? Oh—oh, I see. I was really thinking of—"

"Another consultation? Hardly necessary at present, but if you find it imperative from your own point of view, this address, if I am not in Wandles Parva, will always find me."

"You don't think another consultation will be necessary?"

"What do you think yourself?"

"I don't know," said Phlox with complete sincerity. "I have enjoyed and appreciated this one, I must say, and I thank you for your help. As to the skeleton . . ."

"Oh, yes, the skeleton," said Dame Beatrice. "I can see that, of course."

"You can?" Phlox looked alarmed.

"Not in the sense that you mean. You have inspired me. I am extremely glad to have been of assistance to you. That is all, I think."

"You puzzle me," said Phlox. "I assure you that I had the shock of my life when it became known to me that the cadaver was modern English and not Ancient British. Well, we all have the same way to tread, I suppose, although, of course, we hope we shall not all be murdered. It is rather a horrible thing, murder, isn't it? I really cannot think that we take it sufficiently seriously."

"Murdered, to make a Roman holiday," said Dame Beatrice.

"A *Roman* holiday?" Phlox looked startled. "It is curious that you should say that."

"Not if you could read my mind, Mr. Carmichael, I assure you. I should like to have a word with your wife, if I may."

CHAPTER SIX

Marigold Utters

“It is the method of charity to suffer without reaction.”

Ibid (Section 5)

It seemed to Dame Beatrice that Phlox would have liked to refuse her request to interview Marigold. Certainly there was a pause only long enough for the drawing of a breath, but a pause there was. Then he said:

“Marigold knows nothing more about my hallucinations than I have told you.”

“Possibly not, but it would interest me very much to hear from her own lips the extent to which the hallucinations have affected her.”

“I see. Oh, well, of course, have her in. Do you want me to wait in the next room?”

“No, no. Stay here if you prefer.”

“I’ll go. It might embarrass my wife if she knew that I was listening to what she had to say. I am a firm believer in freedom of speech in every sense of the words.”

He changed places with Marigold, whom Dame Beatrice asked to be seated. There was a silence, broken at last by the young woman.

“Is it serious?” she asked.

“It is much too early to say.”

"Are you going to treat him?"

"That is for him to say. Tell me, Mrs. Carmichael, has he been troubled by hallucinations before? Can you recall any other occasions on which he has been affected like this?"

Marigold rested a tanned and slender arm on the table and leaned slightly forward. Her eyes, of melancholy brown, widened and her lips parted. Dame Beatrice waited.

"I would not say that he had actually *suffered* in this way before," said Marigold at last, "but, of course, he is very highly strung."

"Yes?"

"Oh, yes. He is so artistic, that is the point."

Dame Beatrice envisaged her late patient—his stringy, over-tall figure, his small, intelligent, wary eyes, his long hands and his elegant sandals. Artistic? So that was it. Well, artists could and sometimes did suffer from hallucinations. She nodded, slowly and solemnly.

"Would you call him mentally unstable?" she enquired.

"Phlox?" Marigold screwed up her eyes and puckered her mouth—an attempt to register concentrated thought. "Mentally unstable? Oh, no, I don't think so. Of course, he's restless. We are forever chasing after something different. He becomes bored so soon."

"You yourself, then, would prefer a more settled life? You live on a house-boat, I believe?"

"Yes, our romantic floating home! I love it very dearly."

"But you are not allowed to enjoy it in peace?"

"I always give in to Phlox. He has such a strong, commanding nature and he likes me to share every part of his life—and, of course, that is what I want, too. I've been such a worry and such a responsibility, you know."

"I should be interested to know what you meant when you said that your husband and you were always chasing after something new. What was Mr. Carmichael's latest whim?"

"We walked the Roman Wall."

"How very interesting."

"Yes, it was—*very* interesting."

"What masculine society does Mr. Carmichael enjoy?"

"Oh, none, as a general rule. There is the vicar here—a *dear* man and a great friend—but I don't think that was what you meant."

"You are right. I was thinking of the usual masculine friendships—those which involve, let us say, golf, horseracing, the saloon bar, attendance at football and cricket matches, friendly rivalry at chess or gardening—that kind of thing."

"Phlox is interested in none of them. He did take up chess, but it taxed him too much, so he gave it up."

"You mean he gave it up because he could not beat any other player?"

"He was not really interested in it," said Marigold, on a defiant, protective note.

"I see. Tell me all about the Roman Wall."

"What we did? Where we went? What we saw?"

"Delightful. Of course, you had wonderful weather."

"The weather, on the whole, was quite good, I suppose. I take very little stock in the elements. We are used to roughing it in every possible way. That is why I do appreciate sleeping in a house and having regular meals for which I haven't had to do the shopping."

"No doubt all housewives feel the same way about shopping. You went by train to the north of England?"

"Actually, no. We went in a hired car and paid it off at Newcastle. We came home by train."

"And from Newcastle?"

"We made straight for Corbridge; again in a hired car—it is between sixteen and twenty miles from Newcastle, I believe—and made an exhaustive inspection of the remains at Corstopitum, half a mile to the north-west. There is the most wonderful view of Corbridge and the valley of the Tyne—entrancing! We saw everything that the Ministry of Works

has to offer—granaries, fountain, the enormous courtyard, the military compounds, and, of course, the museum. Then, after a further walk to admire the Vallum and Wall, we returned on foot to Corbridge and put up for the night there.”

“At the *Wheatsheaf*, no doubt?”

“I’ve no idea. Phlox arranges all such matters. I only know that we spent a comfortable night and, in the morning, went on to Hexham, which we had decided to use as our centre for all of the Wall which we had still to see.”

“I wonder that you troubled to stay the night at Corbridge, since it is so close to Hexham.”

“Yes, but we wanted to *do* Corstopitum very thoroughly and then felt we should be too tired—and, possibly, too late for dinner—to go on further.”

“Had Mr. Carmichael suffered from hallucinations up to this point?”

“No, except that he *did* see men of the Asturian cavalry come riding up out of the reservoir at Benwell, two miles or so from Newcastle. It was very odd, because we did not know, until we bought a guide book at Chester, that the Benwell High Reservoir covers about a third of what was the original Roman fort. We were very cross, though, when we found we had missed a temple to a local god *and* a stone causeway, the only one of its kind along the Wall. But that’s Phlox all over. He is quite adorable but terribly, terribly obstinate. He just simply will *not* buy a guide book until he has seen the remains and the places for himself. It’s a form of conceit, I sometimes tell him, and I’m sure that’s true.”

“A harmless form of conceit, surely?”

“Well, not when you find that you haven’t seen things you would have seen if you’d known they were there.”

“So you put up in Hexham? Were Roman remains the only things in which you were interested?”

“Well, we went up there specifically to see the Wall, but we did do Hexham—the priory church and the Moot Hall and

the Manor Office and so on."

"Excellent. How long did you stay in Hexham?"

"Four days, I think, and then we came home by way of Carlisle and the lakes."

"By train, I think you said."

"Yes. We hired a car from Hexham to take us to Carlisle, and then came back by train to London, stayed the night with friends and then came back to our house-boat and so down here."

"And the hallucinations?"

"Phlox says he can't remember when they began to be really troublesome. What did he tell you about them?"

"That during the war they took the form of angels with swastikas on their wings."

"Well, really! You didn't take him seriously, I'm sure!"

"Not very, in one way; extremely so, in another."

"He loves to tease."

"On the contrary, Mrs. Carmichael, far from being a tease, I consider that your husband is an extremely worried man. He now tells me that he has seen and heard the ghost of Caesar's Calpurnia."

"Then don't you think the hallucinations are genuine?"

"As he describes them, no, I do not. As allegorical figures, yes, I do. I have had similar cases. This one is not unique. When I have broken down this fiction and shaken its constituents into facts, we shall all be wiser than we are now."

"But what *is* worrying him?"

"Oh, there is no doubt about what is worrying him. He knows something about the skeleton which he has not disclosed. He cannot make up his mind whether to disclose it or not."

"He cannot know anything which I don't know. We are always together. We do everything together."

"Did you ever read *The Speckled Band*, one of the best of the Sherlock Holmes stories?"

"Yes—a long time ago. Why?"

"Do you remember that Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson both saw the dummy bell-rope and the ventilator which did not ventilate?"

"Yes. Well? What do you mean?"

"Draw your own conclusions, my dear Mrs. Carmichael. You and your husband *went* everywhere together; *saw* everything together; but . . ."

"Phlox's brains are better than mine, of course. I've never argued otherwise."

"Think hard, Mrs. Carmichael, and, when you have thought, come and see me again."

Marigold paused at the door.

"I don't think I want to see you again," she said. Dame Beatrice nodded, as though she approved of this statement. Instantly on edge, Marigold said swiftly, "I do hope you don't think me rude. The fact is . . . well, Phlox isn't the only person to feel worried. I was not particularly upset when I came in here, but you have contrived to make me feel very uneasy. In fact, you are beginning to make me wonder what sinister interpretation I am to put upon these questions you have asked. They give the impression of an inquisition."

"If my questions persuade you to attempt to reconstruct your recent holiday in your mind and to recollect every possible detail of times and places, they will have achieved their object."

"Dame Beatrice, I must ask you to explain what you say."

"Willingly. Do you know the expression—I learned it at the Assizes some years ago—'to be framed?'"

"Yes, I suppose so. It means, I believe, to be the victim of a conspiracy so that one is made to appear to be the guilty person. So *that* is what you are trying to tell me! Why could you not have said so openly, instead of suggesting all those embarrassing things?"

"I am sorry you found them embarrassing. To employ a trite, outmoded, and irritating expression, I asked them, I hope, for your own good. Mrs. Carmichael, have you, or has your husband, an implacable enemy?"

"Oh, yes," said Marigold, speaking with the utmost composure, "we have several."

"You astonish me!"

"There is no need for astonishment. There are our neighbours on the next house-boat. Phlox once pushed their son into the river."

"Upon what provocation?"

"None at all. It was a sheer accident. But they were greatly incensed and demanded that we pay for a new outfit of clothes. We refused, I think with reason, as the boy was trespassing on our bit of the river bank and had thrown a stone at our port-side saloon window, cracking it."

"But Mr. Carmichael pushed him into the river by accident?"

"He was pursuing the boy with the boathook and, in trying to catch him by the back of the jersey, he merely succeeded in prodding him in the lower dorsal region and thrusting him into the water. The boy could swim. There was no possible danger."

"I see."

"The parents took us to court and lost the day. Phlox very sensibly advanced the defence that the boy and he were playing a friendly game and that the boy had tripped over a mooring rope. There were no witnesses except myself and so it was one story against another. I did not bear testimony, but, had I been asked, I should have supported Phlox with all the eloquence I could summon. The view of the court was that the case should never have been brought, and there was an implied criticism from the bench that the boy's parents were attempting to claim damages under false pretences."

"Indeed? Mr. Carmichael has a persuasive tongue, I imagine."

"Phlox is very clever. People think him a crank and an innocent, but that is quite a mistaken view, I assure you."

"The boy, you imply, was never in danger?"

"Certainly not. Even if he *had* been, it was his own fault that he fell into the water."

"And the breach has never been healed?"

"I am afraid not, even though Phlox did point out that, as he had won the case and been granted costs, he would not press the point of the shattered window. They were so angry with him that they paid for it without being asked."

"Very pointed of them. You mentioned that you and your husband had *several* enemies. Are they all members of this particular family?"

"Oh, no. There is the old man who had the sanitary inspector call on him."

"Yes?"

"His cottage was a disgrace, so Phlox appealed to the authorities and there was a fuss. But we were getting rats on board our boat and we could not tolerate that."

"Is the cottage near your house-boat, then?"

"Yes. It is on a bit of waste land about a hundred yards from us. Everybody on the boats had complained, but it took Phlox, with his courage and his public spirit, to get something done."

"And the cottage is now a model of cleanliness?"

"It is deserted, I am thankful to say. They put the old man into some sort of institutional home. The cottage was in very bad repair, so he was very much better off, although he would not admit it."

"A man of that age and type could hardly be considered an enemy, I should have thought."

"His daughter, a vulgar, shrewish woman, came to our boat and threatened us."

"Oh, I see. He has relatives. He is not alone in the world."

"He is not in the world at all. That was why the woman threatened us. He died, it appears, quite shortly after he was admitted to the institution."

"Oh, I see. That does happen when old people are uprooted."

Marigold glanced up sharply, but met a bland, unregistering countenance as yellow and inscrutable as a Chinaman's.

"As though it was *our* fault he was moved!" she protested, feeling, in spite of Dame Beatrice's impassive face, that she had been forced into a defensive position. "How were *we* to know that he would be taken away, *or* that he would die so soon? It isn't reasonable to blame us. We did what we did for the best."

"Such an error, one finds, to do things for the best. They usually seem to be such unpleasant things."

"Oh, but really, Dame Beatrice!"

Dame Beatrice waved a yellow claw.

"So you think the daughter capable of working mischief?" she asked. Marigold shook her head vigorously.

"I think she might be *capable* of it, but I don't see what harm she could do us. You might as well suspect the ferryman."

"Ah, the ferryman!"

"He is quite mad."

"Yes? In what compass direction?"

"Oh, in the direction of the Trade Winds, surely!"

"What happened?" asked Dame Beatrice, betraying no surprise at this totally unexpected answer from the seemingly mousy woman.

"We refused to employ him and persuaded others not to do so."

"Because he was mad?"

"No, no. He was extortionate."

"To what extent?"

"He would not issue season tickets to the people on the house-boats. We had to pay for every single journey if we used him. It cost twopence a time. It meant fourpence a day at the very least. Yes, and besides that, if you used your own rowing boats or dinghies he charged twopence for moorings on his side of the river."

"Was he entitled to do so?"

"No, of course he was not, but he kept an eye on one's rowing boat—at least, he claimed that he did."

"He was in the position, I take it, of the attendant at a car park."

"He was a swindler, but it was better than having one's boat taken by unauthorised people or damaged by delinquent boys, which was the alternative, it seemed."

"You said that you refused to employ him and that you persuaded others to follow your example. But if there was no alternative . . .?"

"Phlox evolved a system and ran a rota."

"Oh, I see. The house-boat people took it in turns to guard the rowing boats."

"Yes, except for Mrs. Counter-Lee. *She* ran a crusade."

"Really? To what end? In defence of the ferryman?"

"Yes, of course. She *would!* She did things to be difficult; to be non-co-operative; to be in the local paper; to be out of step. You know the type, I daresay. She has the next boat but one to ours."

"What, exactly, did she do?"

"She cut mooring-ropes."

"Good gracious!"

"Oh, yes, she did. I caught her at it myself. I accused her to her face."

"Did she deny the accusation?—and at what time of day was this?"

"She not only admitted it, but threatened me with the knife she was using and shouted at me in the most abusive

and alarming way. I pushed her hard and picked up the knife as she dropped it. I said I should go to the police with it if she ever cut mooring-ropes again. This was just at sunset."

"On your own side of the river, I think you mean? In other words, she cut the mooring-ropes of your house-boat?"

"Well, I must admit that she did not get as far as *cutting* them. I felt that something was going on, and went ashore to investigate. I was very glad that I had done so. Although I think I frightened her, we took precautions after that, and exchanged our ropes for chains."

"Did the crusade, as you term it, take no more ethical form than the one you have mentioned? Was there, so to speak, nothing constructive about it?"

"She bombarded the local paper, as I said. I wonder they printed the letters. I suppose her son has a controlling interest."

"She is widowed, then?"

"Oh, yes. A husband would keep her under better control, one would say."

"As Mr. Carmichael keeps you?"

"Phlox——? Oh, but——Oh, well, yes, I suppose so. I mean, I wouldn't do anything that Phlox felt was unsuitable or silly."

"Interesting. How old is the son?"

"A man of thirty or so."

"Perhaps, far from wishing to put an end to, or a damper on, his mother's crusading zeal, he agrees with the stand she has taken."

"He may do," said Marigold, with indifference. "The whole thing is quite ridiculous, anyway, and so I told her."

"I see. So you think that you have enemies? You believe that there are people who would harm you if they could?"

"Oh, yes, they would, but there are only petty ways in which they could do it."

"Are you sure of that? Is not that an example of wishful thinking?"

Marigold met the sharp black eyes of the questioner. She flushed, and then the colour left her face. Suddenly, she looked uneasy.

"I'm quite, quite sure of it," she said. "And now . . ."

"I'm afraid I've kept you a long time," said Dame Beatrice. "Shall we ask Mr. Carmichael to join us in a glass of sherry?"

"He doesn't—we don't drink," said Marigold. "And we really must go, thank you."

"What did you make of them?" asked Laura, when the very strange séances were over and the pair had departed.

"I am confirmed in my view that they are an extraordinary, a deceptive, a guilty, and a devoted couple. There is less in Phlox and, I somehow feel, more in Marigold, than meets the uninstructed eye. We are now justified in regarding them with disfavour and I shall proceed on the assumption that they are attempting to hoodwink us."

"About the skeleton?"

"It is too soon to say that, but it is clear that they have something to hide. Phlox's hallucinations are balderdash. He wanted to . . ."

"Size you up? What cheek!"

"Oh, I don't blame him. He chose an unintelligent method of doing it, perhaps, and yet he may have had a reason for that."

"And Marigold? A dark horse, you think?"

"One would be wrong to underestimate her. But that, of course, can be said of anybody."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Phlox Disclaims

“I condemn not all things in the Council of Trent,
nor approve all in the Synod of Dort.”

Ibid (Section 5)

It was without surprise but with the liveliest anticipation that Dame Beatrice awaited the coming of a visitor on the following morning. Her maid had brought a note to the breakfast table. It was from Phlox Carmichael requesting the pleasure of a further interview and promising to present himself at the Stone House at eleven o'clock that same morning in the hope of finding Dame Beatrice at liberty.

She received him in the morning-room, a sunny, pleasant place, and invited him to be seated. Phlox, however, seemed restless. He went to the window and stared out, walked to the fireplace and gazed at himself in an overmantel mirror, straightened his tie, turned to Dame Beatrice as though about to speak, then went to the window again.

“About those hallucinations of mine,” he said. Dame Beatrice, seated by the hearth and looking, in her jade-green dress, remarkably like a Chinese carving, waited in silence. “I don’t have them. I—that is—it seemed a good way of getting to know you.”

Dame Beatrice, whose nearest relatives, including her late husbands Mr. Lestrangle and Mr. Bradley, would have assured Phlox that to get to know her was outside ordinary human scope, said mildly:

“Oh, yes?”

“It is essential,” Phlox continued, “for me to elucidate a little. My wife yesterday gave you some rather distorted facts. Facts they were, of course, up to a point, but distorted, yes.”

“Mrs. Carmichael, at my request, told me of various small matters over which she had been at variance with her neighbours, that is all.”

“Yes, yes, but the *emphasis* was all wrong. I know the point of view she takes. She has always indicated that we were the aggressors. You formed the opinion, no doubt, that we are at loggerheads with various people through our own fault and because of our own misguided enthusiasms. It is not so. In every case, as I shall seek to show you, we are the victims, not the oppressors.”

Dame Beatrice said, in her most persuasive tones and in her beautiful voice:

“Come and sit down, Mr. Carmichael, and tell me all about it. In the first place, if your hallucinations are of no interest, as such, because they do not exist, I doubt whether you invented them for the reason you gave me. In a word, let us put it like this: what do you fear?”

“Fear?” He looked startled.

“Yes, Mr. Carmichael.”

Phlox pulled himself together.

“I’m not happy about Marigold,” he said. “That is why I wanted to get to know you. I have heard of your reputation, of course, and I wanted you to see and hear Marigold before I actually asked you to take her on as a patient. I guessed that if I invented those hallucinations of mine and you saw *me* as a patient, you would want to talk to my wife about me, both of you entirely unsuspecting as to my motives. In

this way, Marigold would talk to you without any of the distrust which, it is my belief, must exist for a time between the psychiatrist and the patient, and you, with no previous knowledge of her mental state, would talk to her with an open mind unclouded by having come to any premature conclusions."

"I see. It did not occur to you that her having a husband who suffered from the kind of hallucinations unknown to morbid psychology might prejudice me, in the case of Mrs. Carmichael, from the outset?"

Phlox blinked.

"Such a point of view would *never* have occurred to me," he said. Dame Beatrice regarded him benignly. "You mean that you were—well, *watching* Marigold all the time she was with you yesterday?"

"*Watching* is not quite the right word, Mr. Carmichael. The truth is that I was convinced that there was more interest in dealing with Mrs. Carmichael, in certain respects, than there was with you."

"Did our word-associations tell you anything?"

"That is a clinical secret for the present. You shall have the case-notes later. Now, you wish to have some information about my interview with your wife."

"No, no. I have all the information I need. Marigold is notably open and truthful and she has an excellent memory. I am sure she has told me all that was said. All I want to do is to reorient the facts which she gave you."

"Most interesting. I have my notes and can check what you say from those."

"Your own memory is not very good?"

"It serves me faithfully, but I prefer to be exact. Memory, you see, can play tricks because it is highly selective. Shorthand notes, taken verbatim, are open to no such undesirable sub-editing."

Phlox bowed.

"Admirable," he said. "Now, I have no doubt that Marigold mentioned our neighbours, the Exes?"

"She mentioned neighbours but did not so name them."

"Really? Usually she says they must be anonymous—that Exe could not be anybody's name."

"It is the name given to an unknown quantity, is it not?"

Phlox giggled—a strange, unattractive sound as coming from a person of his age and sex.

"An unknown quantity is right," he said. "A dozen squalling, stone-throwing, vicious brats and another (so Marigold tells me) on the way."

"She says you pushed one of them into the river."

"Oh, nonsense! Of course I did not. I wish to goodness she'd get these details right if she's determined to broadcast them!"

"She thought there were extenuating circumstances."

"Such as?"

"That you intended to capture the boy, not to push him into the river."

"I prodded him with a boat-hook. I meant to teach him a lesson. He dived into the river to escape me. He could swim like a fish. He swore at me from his vantage-point in the Thames."

"Did you wait for him to come out?"

"No. His mother came along with a quant-pole. I measured it, with my eye, against my boat-hook and decided to withdraw. She pursued me with threats."

"She took you to court, I understand."

"Me?"

"And you were discharged, as there was no case to be answered."

"I have never been taken to court. My poor Marigold! Whatever rigmarole did she compel you to listen to?"

"The rigmarole was unfolded in the manner which I indicate. She then went on to mention that you had been

instrumental in obtaining the eviction of an old man from his cottage.”

“I hope she mentioned the rats.”

“She did, indeed.”

“I don’t see that I had any alternative but to complain. Shall we let it go at that, please? I am aware that there was an unfortunate aftermath, but that is scarcely my fault.”

“Then there was the episode of the ferryman and his loss of employment.”

“There was no loss of employment. I objected to his obvious cupidity and took steps to deal with it, that’s all.”

“How do you account for the actions of Mrs. Counter-Lee?”

“Drat the woman, say I! She’s just a busy-body.”

“She certainly seems to have been busy with a knife and your mooring-ropes.”

“How do you mean?” He flung out the question like a challenge, but his eyes had narrowed.

“You had to replace your mooring-ropes by chains because Mrs. Counter-Lee tried to saw through the ropes with a knife.”

“But I’ve *always* moored with chains! After all, our boat is *permanently* moored.”

“Is there a Mrs. Counter-Lee?”

“Oh, yes, there is a woman of that name. She paints, I think. We’ve had her on board for cocktails a couple of times.”

“But have never quarrelled with her?”

“Good heavens, no! I hardly know the woman. She came along with some people called Jones.”

“Ah, the ubiquitous Jones! What should we do without them? We have to keep up with them; one of their ilk, Davy, keeps a locker under the sea; Mr. Unspecified Jones went to Jesus College, Oxford; Brown, Jones, and Robinson form an indissoluble trio; Dickins and Jones have a shop; the Jones—oh, no!—the *Bones*—do you play *Snap*, Mr. Carmichael?”

"No, I don't," said Phlox, grimly. "And if some of our enemies are trying to plant that *skeleton* on our doorstep . . ."

"What an extraordinary idea! Why, what other enemies have you?"

"You are making yourself pleasant at my expense," said Phlox, forcing a smile. "At any rate, I hope you see that it is not wise to accept everything that Marigold says as the plain, unvarnished truth."

"I can understand that the truth may be veneered, as well as varnished, Mr. Carmichael. Sometimes it is preferable that way. Thank you very much for coming to see me. We must just keep an eye on your wife. There is no danger at the moment, but we must be vigilant."

"What do you mean?"

"In what sense?"

"You say there is no danger *at the moment*. What danger do you foresee?"

"If we are to dip into the Holmes saga, my dear Mr. Carmichael, I must retort that there would not be danger if we could foresee it."

"But you must have had something definite in mind,"

"Your wife's welfare."

"You are doubtful about her mental state?"

"No, no. It is her physical well-being which concerns me."

Phlox pulled at his long, full, lower lip.

"Her physical well-being?" he said. "But Marigold is perfectly well. In fact, she is extremely fit."

"I hope that she will remain so. How long do you propose to remain in Hampshire?"

"Well, we are promised to the vicar for a bit longer. His Roman road, you know."

"I imagine he has given up wondering whether it begins in Skeleton Corner."

Phlox laughed, but looked uncomfortable.

"Oh, I don't think we shall try just there again," he said. "The police might not like it. I wonder how soon they will be able to identify the skeleton? Not an easy task, I think. How say you?"

"I do not say. With modern methods of detection, identification must be a good deal easier and more certain than it used to be."

"I suppose the bones were those of an elderly person."

"What makes you think so?"

"The absence of teeth. It was noticeable that the cadaver possessed but few."

"I wonder what happened to the dentures?"

"Dentures? Oh, don't you think it was some poor old crone who could not afford them?"

"In these days of the National Health Service?"

"No longer a free-for-all."

"True. Of course, she may have been a gipsy."

"That, I think, is a most likely explanation," said Phlox, eagerly. "Even so, how did she come to be buried on Dickon's smallholding?"

"Quite so. And how did she come to be overlooked by the intelligent small boys and the painstaking large girls? We always come back to that."

"I know. It's a bit of a puzzle, isn't it? Still, I suppose it would be easy enough to miss it if one didn't choose just that place in which to dig. Well, I mustn't keep you any longer from your lawful pursuits, Dame Beatrice."

"Nor I you from your unlawful ones."

"I beg your pardon?"

Dame Beatrice waved a yellow claw and cackled harshly.

"I could not resist making the remark," she said, "and I see that I was justified in making it. I suppose we are all criminals at heart and it rejoices us particularly to poach on preserves which we have sold as a matter of necessity."

"You must have a case in mind."

“Oh, more than one; more than one. There was old Lord X in Ireland; young Tom Y in Yorkshire; the brigadier whose speciality was the salmon fishing he had let to Americans—I could name several more. I know of them because I had to testify in court as to their states of mind.”

“And they were all criminals?”

“Madly and merrily so.”

Phlox searched her face. She shook her head gravely.

“I had to testify in court to their states of mind,” she repeated. Phlox sighed—with relief, it seemed.

“Madly so,” he repeated. “Madly so.”

“And what was all that in aid of?” demanded Laura, when Phlox had gone.

“An attempt to kill a bird with several stones, child.”

“/s he dotty?”

“No, no. A trifle worried, perhaps, still, but feeling better than he did when he came in.”

“I suppose anybody would be worried who’s been questioned by the police. A crank, in particular, would be inclined to panic, I should think. Well, what’s today’s schedule?”

“I want to go to Pollarded Reach, on the River Thames. Would you care to come with me?”

“Are we investigating house-boats?”

“We shall call at one house-boat and upon a ferryman.”

“Do I drive, or does George?”

It was arranged that Laura would drive and, travelling by way of Southampton and Winchester, they turned off for Oxford to reach that stretch of the river where Phlox and Marigold had their home. Dame Beatrice, having obtained the postal address from the vicar’s wife, anticipated no difficulty in getting local guidance to the actual spot, although moorings along that part of the river were numerous.

The house-boat was a flat-roofed affair with a covered sun-deck. It needed a coat of paint and the cabin curtains were grimy. Laura commented on these points.

"You wouldn't think they had money, to look at this dump."

"Have they money?"

"So the vicar says. Marigold, in particular, is rolling in it. A godmother died and left her a tremendous dollop."

"Really? Fortune would seem to smile on her."

"On both of them, I should think. Phlox—you know, Phlox has never struck me as a possible Christian name, even for a woman, let alone a man—anyway, he's quite well off, too. Doesn't need to work and all that sort of thing. I'm glad Gavin has a job. I'd loathe to live with a lounge lizard."

"I thought that the Carmichaels were always fully occupied, even if not for monetary gain."

"*Dilettanti*, both, if you ask me. I can't stand either of them. Arty-crafty, to my mind. I always expect to see Marigold in robe and sandals. Phlox *does* wear sandals. He also wears plum-coloured trousers."

"Clothes do not necessarily make the man."

"No, but they do give him away. What do we do now we're here? Gate-crash the boat and force the doors to the saloon?"

"No, we visit the neighbours. I am anxious to obtain firsthand confirmation of the three stories told me by Mrs. Carmichael."

"There are neighbours on both sides."

"So I perceive. Let us direct our steps towards the more ambitious craft. A lifeboat conversion, if I mistake not."

"Yes. Made a good job of it, I'd say. Do you want me to shout?"

"An excellent idea. Pray do so."

"Ahoy, there!" yelled Laura. "Ahoy! Boat ahoy!"

The solemn and enquiring face of a three-year-old child was poked round the edge of a door and then withdrawn,

and a woman appeared. She wore navy-blue slacks and her heavy bosoms cupped out a fisherman's jersey. She was about thirty years old, had the reflective eyes of a cow and was eating a hunk of bread from which honey dripped on to her fingers.

"Yes?" she said. "If you want the Carmichaels, they're away."

"I have come for information about the Carmichaels, if you will be good enough to answer a question."

The child and a small white dog appeared on either side of the woman, who stuffed the remainder of the bread and honey into her mouth, wiped her sticky fingers on the dog and said, with difficulty, because her mouth was unbecomingly full:

"You'd better come aboard. Keep to the left of the gangplank. It's rotten in the middle, like most of them along here."

The boat, inside, was roomy, comfortable, and untidy. The woman took the child ashore and called the dog as soon as the visitors were seated. She returned very shortly and Laura said:

"Aren't you afraid to leave your daughter by herself on the bank of the river?"

"Oh, no," the woman replied. "She's fallen in once, so it won't happen again. Now, then, what do you want to know and why do you want to know it?"

"Mrs. Carmichael thinks that she and her husband have made enemies in this part of the world and I am anxious to find out whether she is right."

"She and her husband!—if he *is* her husband, which, personally, I very much doubt—I should think they *have* made enemies. Are you friends of theirs?"

"No. I am a psychiatrist. I have been consulted by them."

"A psychiatrist? Oh, I see. I should think they need one. They do the most outrageous things."

"Such as?"

"Well, once they poisoned my dog. Fortunately he was so sick, poor thing, that the attempt to murder him did not come off. I would have taken them to court for it but I didn't think I could afford it if I lost the case. He keeps well clear of them now. He's learnt his lesson."

"Had they any reason to dislike the dog?"

"They said he kept them awake at night. He certainly does yap a bit, but what's the use of a dog in a place like this if he doesn't bark? We get some peculiar customers round here, as my husband pointed out to them."

"You are not the only person, I believe, to fault them."

"No, of course not. They've behaved disgustingly to several people."

She proceeded to provide chapter and verse, confirming the stories which Marigold had recounted and adding others, until it seemed to Laura that the Carmichaels must be among the most deeply-detested persons along the whole of the Thames.

"Well!" said Dame Beatrice when they were in the car. "And what do we make of all that?"

"She thoroughly enjoyed blackening Phlox and Marigold to us. That was obvious. Did you note her impolite implication that they are not married?"

"Yes, but I am not sure that my interpretation of the remark is the same as your own."

"Cryptic, aren't you?"

"And possibly mistaken. Time will show. We must labour on 'til truth make all things plain. Has the most interesting point about the skeleton occurred to you?"

"You mean that Phlox and Marigold have an anxiety complex about it? I'm not surprised. After all, they *did* find it."

"Actually, it was the vicar who uncovered the first signs that it was there."

“Well, I suppose he isn’t bothered because one doesn’t connect slashing people’s heads open with the office of priest.”

“He is conscious of his own innocence in the matter, and the consciousness of innocence is a strong shield against the kind of anxiety from which the Carmichaels are suffering. I may tell you that I learned a good deal from my conversations with them both, and from Phlox’s word-associations.”

“Yes—why *did* he consult you? It was a particularly wild thing to do if he does have guilty knowledge of them thar bones.”

“He certainly has guilty knowledge of *something*, but whether it is of the murder I have not entirely made up my mind. He consulted me in order to find out how my mind was working and what my suspicions were, I think. It had not that result, and at first this added to, not detracted from, his anxieties. Marigold was worried, in her own way, too, and was extremely anxious to convince me that she and Phlox had enemies. I gave her a lead in that direction, I admit, but she took advantage of it with the utmost eagerness. By the way, you noticed the most arresting feature of our talk with the neighbour, I imagine?”

“You mean the bit about poisoning the dog?”

“Exactly.”

“Why do you think Marigold left it out?”

“It indicated an innate ability to commit murder.”

“Dog-lover though I am, I can’t swallow that.”

“I am not a dog-lover, but I tolerate the animals and regard them as reasonably desirable fellow-creatures. I am disinclined, therefore, to countenance their destruction by poison.”

“You think the woman was speaking the truth?”

“I formed that impression, but I may be mistaken. Apart from that one incident, it is quite clear to me that the Carmichaels are building up two different lines of defence.”

“One, that the skeleton was planted by their enemies; the other a defence of insanity, backed up by you, if the worst does come to the worst and they have to stand trial?”

“It will be the result of their own foolishness if it does come to that. But now for the ferryman, to hear what he has to say.”

“It won’t be fit for our ears, but I like to increase my vocabulary. Do we hail him? I’ll yodel, shall I?”

“No, no. We will drive on, and cross by the bridge.”

“I suppose the person who feels most strongly about the Carmichaels is the woman whose father was removed to the institution.”

“One would certainly think so.”

“Shall you contact her?”

“I hardly think it will be necessary. We have quite sufficient evidence that the Carmichaels are disliked, and she lives in another district.”

“I don’t see what you’re getting at,” said Laura.

“Well, for one thing, I want to know whether the Carmichaels really did go to the Roman Wall before they came to the vicarage this time. As the ferryman is likely to take more notice of their movements across the river than anybody else, he may be able to help us. That is all.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Charon Asserts

"These are but the conclusions and the fallible discourses of man . . ."

Ibid (Section 23)

At first the ferryman was cryptic and unhelpful.

"All's as may be," he said. "I got what I got to say, and I've *not* got what I got to say, as you might say."

Dame Beatrice declined to interpret this Delphic pronouncement.

"What are your duties?" she enquired. The ferryman looked at her in a haughty and uninhibited fashion before he spat into the long-suffering Thames.

"My dooties be my pleasure," he said.

"I am delighted to hear it. Would it be in order for me to suggest that your pleasures are fleshly?"

"So to say. So to say. I ferries bodies over the water."

"A classic occupation."

"Ah! I've took Oxford dons in my boat in my time."

"Excellent. Would you regard Mr. Phlox Carmichael as an Oxford don?"

"Him?"

"In person."

The ferryman expressed himself freely in Basic Riverside. He concluded:

"If that gentleman come within a mile of me, I'll *do* him, same as David done Goliath."

"With a pebble and a sling?"

"The only sling as would do that one any good is a sling round his neck on the gallows."

"I wonder what makes you say that? A most inoffensive person, I should have thought."

"You ever seed a *tarantella*?"

"A *tarantella*?"

"Ah, a *tarantella*. One o' them pi'sonous spiders big as yer fist."

"You are comparing Mr. Carmichael to a *tarantula*?"

"It's a king compared with 'im."

"Dear me! This is most interesting. Kindly let me have chapter and verse."

"Try, maybe, *Psalms Fifty-eight*."

"Ah, yes. 'Their poison is like the poison of a serpent: they are like the deaf adder that stoppeth her ear.' Is that the quotation to which you refer?"

"And to come. Try *Proverbs Twenty-three*."

"I comprehend. 'At the last, it biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder.' Yes?"

"Indeed, yes. I can see you been brought up the right way."

"Have you anything more to tell me?"

"What need? Beware of 'im, that's all I say."

"And very good it is of you to say it. Come, Laura. Let us away."

"'Arf a mo," said the ferryman, earnestly. "Chapter and verse, you says, and well I takes your meanin'. There were the neighbour's dog as 'e pi'soned."

"I heard about that."

"There were poor old Tom Trabbett, as 'e plunged into the mad'ouse."

"An institution for elderly men, I was given to understand."

"There were me and my ferryboat, the dirty, enterferin' rascal!"

"Too bad. Were the Carmichaels often from home?"

"More away than 'ere, thank God. Allus orf on some jaunt or other. More money nor sense. And the junk they brought 'ome from foreign parts! Loaded me boat to the water-line, ferryin' it over!"

"When did they last go away?—before this particular time, I mean."

"Ah, now, let me think. Ho, yus. They 'ired Bill Norris's car. Bill 'ud tell ee. Fust garridge past the bridge. You can't miss it. 'E'll 'ave the dates of goin' and comin', will Bill. Very methodical, is Bill Norris, due to the Income Tax and that. You'd be surprised 'ow inquisitive they is, them Income Tax, and that onbelievin'—it don't pay you to be honest! They queries every penny of 'is expenses and 'e can't allus show a receipted bill, can 'e, now?"

"Probably not. Well, thank you very much, Mr"

"Cargery, Oliver John Vincent Cargery, is my moniker, lady. Oliver for Oliver Cromwell, John for the Bible, Vincent for St. Vincent of Paul."

"Remarkable!"

"Well, my dad, 'e were a sort of reasonable old bloke and very interested in 'eaven."

"Heaven?"

"Ah, 'eaven. But 'e never could make up 'is mind which of the religions 'ad the right to it. 'Me lad,' 'e says to me, 'I don't know who's in the right of it,' 'e says, 'but you ought to get into 'eaven on *one* o' your names,' 'e says. 'I done the best by you as I could,' 'e says, 'likewise for your sister.'"

"Indeed?" said Dame Beatrice, in a tone of great interest.

"Oh, yus. My sister, she was called Elizabeth Fry—that done for the Bible *and* for the Quakers (bein'

Nonconformists, you see)—Elizabeth Fry Catherine of Siena Cargery. Very proud of us, 'e were."

"A good father, indeed!" Dame Beatrice nodded with great affability, rewarded the old man and returned with Laura to the car. They drove off, with Laura at the wheel, and soon found Bill Norris's garage. The proprietor and a white-coated assistant were gazing abstractedly at a jacked-up car. Laura pulled up and got out.

"Mr. Norris?" she asked.

"That's me."

"Can you spare a moment to talk to Dame Beatrice?"

"Sure. What seems to be the trouble?"

"She'll tell you."

Dame Beatrice had followed Laura out of the car. Norris nodded to her.

"Want an overhaul, madam, or do you know what's wrong?" he asked, in the off-hand manner of the self-employed.

"I neither want an overhaul nor do I know what is wrong. I have come to beg the favour of a few minutes' conversation on the subject of a Mr. Carmichael, who hired your car a few weeks ago to go to the Scottish border."

"No complaints, and paid me on the nail."

"So I am given to understand—that there were no complaints, I mean, of course. Would you be prepared to look up your records and tell me the route which you followed and the approximate time you took?"

"If you're making a boney-fied enquiry. You thinking of going that way?"

"Certainly. Of course, I could ask the R.A.C. or the A.A., I suppose, but the Carmichaels recommended you highly, so I thought that perhaps you might oblige me. I must add, in all fairness, that I am not thinking of hiring your car."

"Oh, that's all right. Let's see now. Started off from their boat—cor, did I bless that river-bank mud!—at six in the morning. Breakfasted at eight in Leighton Buzzard. Stopped

for lunch in Grantham at half-past twelve, tea in Harrogate at four, and got to the *Grand* in Newcastle at seven. Paid me off as soon as I'd helped the porter in with the luggage, so I drove back to Durham, where I got a brother working, and stayed the night. Got back here soon after four the next day, and that's the lot."

"Thank you for your information."

"You're welcome. Don't want nothing done to your car?"

"Test for oil, please, and check the tyres."

Dame Beatrice tipped him so heavily for these services that Norris, gazing after the car as it drove off, remarked to his assistant that it was a pity there were not more about like her, a tribute so rare, in her case, that it is well worth recording.

"Well," said Laura, after they had turned on to the road which would take them through Basingstoke and so home, "how soon do we start for Newcastle?"

"That Norris seems a most obliging, good-natured man," said Dame Beatrice, avoiding the question since she did not, at that time, know the answer. "I wonder whether he was equally obliging and good-natured to the Carmichaels?"

"You could ask them," said Laura, perfectly well aware that this was the last thing Dame Beatrice proposed to do. Dame Beatrice cackled.

"There are better ways out of the wood than climbing spiked railings," she said. "And, by the way, if, in the general give and take of conversation, our jaunt of today forms a topic, we visited my nephew Carey's pig-farm at Stanton St. John. I see no moral lapse in telling lies when people ask questions about what is not their business."

"Basically," said Laura, "I am a congenital liar. Some Highlanders are. To my ancestors, the truth was so sacred as to be unusable."

"It is good to know that there are religious reasons for lying. My study of the Old Testament has long since

convinced me that this must be so. Are you hungry?"

"Starving. I'll let the car out on the Winchester by-pass. I don't want to stop before we get home because I am not only hungry but thirsty, and I couldn't bear to stand by and watch you mopping up sherry while I had to stay my stomach with a still lemonade."

They reached the Stone House to find Henri, Dame Beatrice's cook, in a state of ferment and his wife Célestine in near-hysterics because no time had been set for a cooked meal, so that nothing was ready.

"Sandwiches," said Dame Beatrice, waving a yellow claw. "Whisky, sherry, and sandwiches."

Henri called upon God and Célestine upon the name of a dog—blasphemy in reverse, as it were—but the food and drink arrived in the dining-room inside a quarter of an hour.

"And for dinner tonight?" asked Henri, plonking down bowls of cold consommé, smoked salmon, red caviare, thin brown bread and butter, Melba toast, chicken breasts in aspic, a Russian salad, and a beautifully fresh lettuce. "What does madame wish for dinner?"

"Duck and green peas," said Laura.

Newcastle, *Pons Aelii* of the Romans and, later, the city of Robert Curthose of Normandy, Duns Scotus of the Franciscans, Charles I (surrendered here by the Scots), Mark Akenside, Lord Eldon and Admiral Collingwood, offered to Laura its usual charm. To her it was the gateway to her native Scotland.

On this occasion, having spent the night in Hull, she and Dame Beatrice reached Newcastle in time for an early lunch which they took at the *Grand*. Here Dame Beatrice's enquiries followed the pattern of those she had made at Norris's garage. The porter remembered the Carmichaels. They had asked his advice about hiring a car to visit the

Roman Wall, and he had telephoned for them and had made all the arrangements.

"They don't seem to have been up to N.B.G.," remarked Laura, when Dame Beatrice advised her of what had been said. "They've left a pretty open trail. Or are they just simply mad?"

"The trouble about madness is that it is apt to be methodical," said Dame Beatrice. "At any rate, we can follow the trail. I have left instructions with the porter to ring up the same garage and try to get us the same driver."

"Bit of luck if he can. Good thing it's a private hire service and not a taxi rank."

"It is a very small business, so the porter tells me—just a man and his son. Which one we get hardly matters, as he is certain to know the route the other took."

"Yes, and Phlox and Marigold are not people you would forget or get mixed up with anybody else. When do we start?"

"As soon as the man can get here. Of course, both cars may be out."

The porter came up at that moment to inform Dame Beatrice that the car would be outside the hotel in a quarter of an hour's time. If he wondered why the owner of a chauffeur-driven Jaguar should choose to hire a car for her excursions, he did not betray the fact. He merely stated that Dame Beatrice would find Game a reliable man and a safe driver.

Game drove up at the appointed time and said he understood that the ladies wanted to see the Roman Wall.

"Some people we met had you to drive them. This would have been some weeks ago. We should wish to follow the same route."

"I always take the same route, madam. Percy Street, Newgate Street, Clayton Street, Westgate Street, and we're on the road to Shield, which is the best starting place to see the Wall. I drop people at Shield if they like walking, and

they can take the footpath to Greenhead and see pretty nearly all there is to see of the Wall itself. But if people don't want a twelve-mile walk—and there's plenty that don't—well, you can walk out and back and I pick you up again where I set you down."

"What did Mr. and Mrs. Carmichael do?"

"Oh, they paid me off at Shield and said they should very likely put up somewhere for the night."

Dame Beatrice did not comment on this statement, but she heard a suppressed groan from Laura. If the car had been paid off at Shield and the Carmichaels had gone on by foot, there seemed little chance of tracing their subsequent movements. The twenty-seven-mile journey to Shield was accomplished in just under an hour, for Game was convinced, apparently, that his passengers were interested in seeing as much of the countryside as they could. He pointed out, with enthusiasm, the fragments of the Wall to be seen at Denton Burn and Hedden-on-the-Wall, the site of Vindobala and Hunnum, and gave their later names of Rutchester and Halton Chesters. At Stagshawbank he insisted upon stopping the car and handing his passengers out to admire the extensive views. At Chesters he turned them out again to see the excavated site of Cilurnum and the collection of Roman antiquities in the lodge. After this, Laura struck. She resolutely declined to get out of the car at Carrawburgh to see the site of Procolitia, so Game rather sadly covered the succeeding two miles and pulled up at Shield-on-the-Wall.

From here the Wall strode over basaltic cliffs and the views were of great extent and sombre beauty. Laura, who was fond of walking, decided to tackle the twelve-mile stretch of footpath to Greenhead station, where the car would pick her up. Dame Beatrice, desiring the car to wait for an hour, accompanied her as far as the National Trust property of Barcovicus, near Housesteads, then she returned and Laura went on alone.

Laura did not stop to visit the small museum, but, having taken leave of her employer, she set off for the nearby mile-castle, which she did stop to admire, and then she turned aside to visit the Northumbrian Lakes, bleakly set in a landscape of desolate beauty. It was here that she encountered a shepherd. Such, at any rate, she judged him to be (although there were no sheep to be seen) from the appearance and slinking gait of his dog.

Laura passed the time of day cheerily and was striding on when she realised that the man was addressing her. She stopped and turned, but even an ear attuned to the cadences and peculiarities of the many and various Scottish dialects could make nothing of his strange Northumbrian vowels.

"Sorry," she said, shaking her head and smiling, "I don't get it."

The shepherd raised his notched blackthorn and pointed.

"Comprenez-vous le français?" he demanded.

"Oui, parfaitement, monsieur."

"Puis, on dit qu'il faut avoir un témoin."

"Pourquoi?"

"Venez."

"Non. Les heures courent. Je me dépêche."

She turned from the shepherd and hurried away. When she glanced back she saw that he had waylaid two young men who also, it seemed, had planned to walk the Wall.

Laura had more than her share of curiosity. It was one thing to walk off by herself into the wilds of Northumbria with a middle-aged man whose English was unintelligible but whose French was readily comprehensible; it was quite another, to her mind, when safety through numbers presented itself. She turned and ran back to where she had left the shepherd.

"What does he say?" she asked, when she came level with the trio.

"He wants a witness."

"Yes, so he told me. What for?"

"He says there's a dead body about a couple of miles from here."

"Why does he want a witness?"

"He seems to think somebody else ought to see it. We'd better go along with him, I suppose. Are you walking over to Greenhead?"

"Yes, I am."

"So are we. If you care to wait . . ."

"Oh, I'm coming with you to see the body."

"Hardly that. Not very nice for a woman."

"It's no nicer for men, and I'm quite accustomed to bodies." She turned to the shepherd.

"*Allons, monsieur,*" she said. He led the party by a track which they could scarcely make out, but which seemed as clear to him as the open road, beside a lake and across the wild moor to a riven copse of stunted silver birches and gorse bushes.

"We arrive, it seems," said one of the young men. Laura, guided by who knows what premonition vouchsafed her by her Highland ancestry, parted the thorny shrubs of gorse and peered in as though she knew exactly the position in which the corpse was lying.

"Here she is," she said. The young men crammed forward.

"Don't touch it!" said one, looking with horror and disgust at the lifeless, pathetic body.

"Not on your life!" said the other. Laura said:

"I think I recognise her. Look here, this is more serious than I can very well explain. I must get back to Newcastle at once." She broke into a run and did not relax until she was certain that the others were not following her. Scarcely knowing how she did it, she found her way back to the footpath which led to the highest land on which the Wall was built. She paused to look neither at mile-castles nor

turrets, but made the best time she could to Great Chesters and then tackled the broken cliffs of basaltic rock, the Nine Nicks of Thirlwall, and forced the pace past Magna, the modern Carvoran, to the station at Greenhead.

"I don't know what we'd better do," she said, seating herself beside Dame Beatrice and accepting a heartening drink of rum and coffee poured from a thermos flask, "but the sooner we're back in Newcastle and at the police station, the better."

"Drink, and then the man can start the car. You have come far and, it appears to me, much too fast. Relax for five minutes. Even the news of another murder will keep for as long as that."

Laura finished the drink and handed back the cup.

"How on earth did you guess?" she asked. Dame Beatrice shrugged.

"Your feverish manner told its own tale," she said. She pulled open the communicating window between the back seat and the driver. "Back to the hotel, and at the roundest pace you can achieve," she said. "To save time is now important." She closed the aperture. "And now?" she said to Laura. Laura described her experiences.

"What makes you think it was murder?" Dame Beatrice asked.

"It seems to me that it stands to reason. Why should a woman who's stayed more than once in our vicarage at Wandles be found dead on a Northumbrian moor when, according to Veronica Pierce, she left to go to America?"

"Miss Beads?"

"Hilary Beads. Or so I think. She's a bit decayed. And don't let's forget that she was only the second—no, the third—person to be shown Dickon's Roman finds."

"Well, well! It will be a good thing when we are back in Newcastle, although, by then, the police may have received the news over the telephone."

This did not prove to be the case. Laura's story was the first report the police had received. They wrote down her statement and read it over to her. She agreed that it was correct, but was not asked to sign it. The officer pointed out, very kindly, but with north-country bluntness, that they had yet to prove that matters were as she had given them to understand. Not that they disbelieved her, he explained, but they had to satisfy themselves that her story was true. She gave him her address in the city and, to her amusement, before he let her go, he solemnly rang up the *Grand* and confirmed that she was indeed staying there.

Laura returned to the hotel and to Dame Beatrice, and said that she supposed she would have to prolong her stay until after the inquest. This being so, Dame Beatrice returned alone to the Stone House to receive a piece of information which appeared to confirm Laura's view that the body in Northumberland was indeed that of Hilary Beads. There was a short note awaiting her. It came from Veronica Pierce, who said that she and the vicar were perturbed to learn that the aunt whom Hilary Beads had promised to visit before her departure for America had not set eyes on her niece at all. Further, the aunt had received a cable from the American friends with whom Hilary had been going to stay, enquiring whether Hilary had changed her plans, as she had not turned up there, either.

Dame Beatrice, who had broken her long journey and stayed the night with friends in Salisbury whom she had long promised to visit, arrived home in plenty of time to go round to the vicarage as soon as she had read Veronica's note. She was shown the aunt's letter.

"Of course, we've written off to say that Hilary cut short her stay with us by three days in order to visit her aunt," said Veronica, "and that she left us after tea on the Wednesday and that Gascony drove her to the station with the light luggage she had brought with her. Her heavy baggage, of course, had gone straight to Southampton."

"I wonder whether it was put on board the liner she should have travelled on?" said the vicar, who was also present.

"If events followed their normal course, it should have been," said Dame Beatrice. "Presumably the light luggage you mention would have been sufficient for the few days' trip across the Atlantic and the heavy baggage would have been stowed away in the baggage-room in the hold of the vessel. Nobody checks whether the passenger is actually on board when the crane picks up its net."

"What about the New York end?" asked Veronica.

"Presumably the heavy baggage would be unloaded from the hold in the same way and transferred to the Customs sheds," said her husband. "I suppose we had better get on to the shipping people to find out which cabin she was to have occupied and whether her light luggage was delivered to it."

"That task might be better left in official hands," said Dame Beatrice. "If you like, I will take the necessary steps through Laura's husband. He will know exactly what to do and whom to contact."

The Pierces thankfully left the matter to her and she returned to the Stone House to ring up Gavin. She told him of Laura's gruesome find in Newcastle and then gave him the news about Hilary Beads' aunt. He promised to obtain the information she wanted, and added that Laura was a pest.

"There's one thing," he said. "If this aunt is the nearest relative, she'll have to buzz up to Newcastle and identify the body formally. It can't be left to Laura."

CHAPTER NINE

The Riddle of the Beads

“. . . whose effects we may foretel without an Oracle: to foreshew these, is not Prophecie, but Prognostication.”

Ibid (Section 17)

THE body had been brought in by the police, whom Laura accompanied to the spot where she had seen it. It had been photographed, examined by the police medical officer, its pockets turned out and a search instituted for other tangible clues. Laura saw nothing of these interesting but abortive exertions, for, the moment she had shown the police the body, she was hurried back to a car by the police matron and driven straight to the police station, where the kindly woman insisted upon giving her a cup of strong tea. Thus, until the inquest, which was held two days later, Laura remained unaware of a salient fact.

From the investigation which was made on the spot, one interesting and irritating fact emerged. There was nothing on or about the corpse itself to betray the identity of the dead woman. Apart from a Newcastle bus ticket, which had worked its way into the slightly torn lining of a jacket pocket, and two sixpences and a half-penny which had done the same thing, there was nothing to be found. There were no laundry marks on the underclothing, and the jacket and

waterproof were of the “off the peg” variety. There was no hat anywhere to be found, and the woman either carried no handbag, or had had it stolen. The body was not mutilated in any way except for the heavy blow on the back of the head which had caused death. There was nothing in the immediate vicinity to suggest that the death had not been natural—the result of an accident—and, apart from the fact that it would scarcely have been possible for even the most determined person to have struck herself such a blow on the back of the skull, there was no trace of a weapon. The police quartered the ground and, a considerable distance from the body, found a small boulder which they took to test for bloodstains.

Meanwhile, at the vicarage, Dame Beatrice made the disclosure that a body, believed by Laura to be that of Hilary Beads, had been found in Northumberland. She also mentioned the French-speaking shepherd who had discovered the body, and the two young men who had also seen it.

“A French-speaking Northumbrian shepherd? Oh, well, I suppose it would have made a nine-days’ wonder at one time,” said the vicar, “but now that every schoolchild seems to join a school party and go to France and has been taught French, there seems nothing very unusual about it.”

“Dame Beatrice says he was a middle-aged man, though,” objected Veronica.

“An ex-soldier with a French wife, my dear.”

“Most probably,” said Dame Beatrice. “At any rate, he shouldn’t be difficult to trace. They will need him at the inquest, and those two young men as well. It will be adjourned, of course, after the purely formal evidence has been taken, but I should hardly think that they will want Laura now that she has given them a statement.”

“You did not, yourself, want to take a look at the body?”

“No,” said Dame Beatrice, “I did not. I had a reason.”

"Which you are not prepared to disclose, I guess," said Veronica. "Well, we won't press you."

"In any case, it seemed best to inform the police as soon as possible, I am sure," said the vicar. "But, you know, I am at a complete loss. There is something so very odd about it all. Why on earth should Hilary have left us to travel to America when, all the time, she meant to go to Northumberland?"

"The only people who have any connection with Northumberland, so far as we know," said Veronica Pierce, "are the Carmichaels."

"Really, my dear, that is not a proper sort of remark," remonstrated her husband. "Not at all a proper thing to say."

"What are you going to do next?" asked Veronica, ignoring the vicar's strictures and addressing Dame Beatrice.

"I should like to know all that you can tell me about Miss Beads."

"You know as much as we do."

"She did not begin by being a family friend, so to speak?"

"No. She came here first to recuperate after an illness. We did not charge her much because she seemed a nice person and we did not think it right to charge an invalid a lot of money," said Veronica. "After that, she turned up about every eighteen months or two years. In fact, we've seen quite a lot of her, I suppose. She must have stayed here half a dozen times at least."

"Do you know of any previous connection she had had with any other of your visitors?"

"None at all. If you are particularising, as I feel sure you are, she and the Carmichaels have never met, so far as I know."

"Not even on this last visit?"

"I don't see how they can have done. We wrote to put off Phlox and Marigold. They always expect separate bedrooms, and we could not manage that while Hilary was staying here. Our accommodation is limited. We *must* keep a separate room for a study and, apart from that, we've only three bedrooms and a dressing-room."

"They might have met in the village. Their stay in the village overlapped, no doubt?"

"Overlapped?"

"My informant was Laura. She mentioned that one of the small boys from Pelican House described Phlox Carmichael to the life and said that he mended a shoe for him the day the boys went digging at Dickon's."

"Neither the Carmichaels nor Hilary mentioned a meeting in the village. I suppose it didn't occur to them. But it's very peculiar that the Carmichaels have never told us where stayed from that Wednesday until the Saturday."

"It seems more than ever important to discover the identity of the skeleton which was found on Dickon's smallholding!"

"Yes," said Veronica Pierce, frowning, but avoiding the implication, "I know. Gascony is most anxious that that should be found out. After all, he was the person who first uncovered it."

"So you think that I should suspect him, equally with the Carmichaels, of having guilty knowledge of how it came to be there?"

Veronica laughed. Dame Beatrice, leering in an amiable fashion, nodded.

"Seriously, though," said Veronica, "although I don't like Phlox at all and can only just about tolerate Marigold, it doesn't seem reasonable to suspect them of murder. I mean, there really isn't anything to go on, is there? Anyway, I do hope the police will be able to find out what Hilary did instead of going to Southampton, as we thought she'd done."

"Let us go into that. She came to stay with you—when, exactly?"

"Saturday, the eleventh."

"And stayed until . . .?"

"The following Wednesday week."

"And Mr. and Mrs. Carmichael?"

"Not until the Saturday after that. We had expected Hilary to stay until the Saturday morning, but she had this letter from an aunt, inviting her to go and see her before she sailed."

"You did not see the letter, of course?"

"No. Neither was it delivered to the house. Hilary told us that she took it from the postman at the gate and said that it was from her aunt who lived in Bournemouth."

"Well, that isn't far from Southampton, where she was to embark. All the more curious that her body was found in Northumberland, except that we have no idea where she was killed. I think perhaps we should make contact with the aunt."

"If we knew the aunt's surname, you could go to Bournemouth and look her up in the directory or even in the telephone book. Oh, I wonder . . .?"

"Yes?"

"I wonder whether she ever mentioned the aunt's name to Gascony." She went immediately to the door, opened it and called out, "Darling, are you in your study?"

He was, and came out, fountain pen in hand.

"What is it, my dear?"

"Did you ever hear Hilary Beads mention her aunt's surname?"

"Yes, it is the same as her own. She was joking about it. Her unfortunate aunt was baptised in the name of Carnelian. The full name, as I recollect it, was Carnelian Jetta Beads."

"Oh, *no!*"

"So poor Hilary told me. People often saddle children with unfortunate names—or try to. Don't you remember how

angry and upset Abel and Mary Bates were when I refused to accept the names of William Conqueror Hastings for their first-born and insisted upon William Rufus Henry instead?"

"Just as historical, if it was history they wanted. Yes, I do remember. Thank you, dear, for remembering about Carnelian Jetta. How awful!"

Dame Beatrice drove to Bournemouth on the following day and located Miss C. J. Beads without difficulty with the aid of the telephone directory. She rang her up and was invited to call at half-past three, so, after a leisurely lunch and a pleasant stroll along the sea-front, she drove to Miss Beads' address. It turned out to be a very superior type of boarding-house and she was shown by the maid into the private sitting-room.

Miss Beads, in a black jersey suit and pearls, begged her to be seated, rang the bell and ordered tea, and then turned with some curiosity to her distinguished guest.

"About my niece, I think you said, Dame Beatrice," she observed. "It has all been very trying. Have you anything to tell me? I suppose I ought to bring the police into it, but, you know, a place like this"—she waved a hand at the room in which they sat—"could soon be ruined if I had policemen nosing around."

"I understood from the vicar and his wife in the village I come from—Wandles Parva—that you invited your niece to pay you a visit before she went to America. Is that correct?"

"Oh, yes, I did, but that was before Christmas, when she first wrote and told me she was going to New York. She also suggested that I should lend her some money as a kind of bulwark. I promised it if she'd come and see me."

"But you wrote to her some weeks ago and renewed your invitation," Miss Carnelian Beads stared in surprise.

"That I most certainly did *not*," she said. "Those girls were always most casual. I should not dream of repeating an invitation to her to come and stay. As for her married sister, well, I wasn't even invited to the wedding."

“Had she mentioned any specific date on which she would be likely to call and see you?”

“She said she had to embark on Saturday, May twenty-fifth, and would call in on the morning of that day.”

“Now, Miss Beads, what was your reaction when your niece did not turn up?”

“I did not have a reaction. Nothing more had been said, and I had not the slightest idea of whether really to expect her or not. You see, like so many of these clever, modern people, Hilary would never put herself out in any way. If you asked her to come, she would either turn up or not turn up, and then, if the latter, you might hope to get a postcard or a telephone call at any time during the next couple of months, without a word of apology. She was extremely casual, as I say, but she said, when I mentioned it once, that she was very sorry, but she was afraid all her family were like that, and that life was short enough, anyway. What really worries me is the way she seems to have left those nice Americans in the lurch. She simply seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth. They cabled me first of all at the end of the first week in June.”

“They had your address, then?”

“Hilary must have given it to them, I suppose, although I can’t think why. I didn’t trouble to answer the cable. Hilary’s bad manners are no concern of mine. But now they’ve cabled again and I simply don’t know what to think or to do.”

“Did your niece—was she ordinarily resident in London? I know she had business premises, but had she a flat or rooms?”

“Yes, she had two very nice rooms in Chelsea. Well, she always *said* they were very nice rooms. I never saw them.”

“Whereabouts in Chelsea?”

“I’ve still got the last letter she wrote me—the one in which she said she was going to America. Her letters, as I

told you, were so few and far between that I got into the habit of keeping the last one."

"Are you her only living relative?"

"No. My brother divorced Hilary's mother ten years ago. He died soon afterwards, but, so far as I know, the mother is still alive, although I could not tell you where she lives. She may have married again, for all I know. Then, of course, there's the sister I mentioned, but I haven't seen *her* for years and years."

"Have you any idea whether they have kept in touch with Hilary?"

"Hilary never spoke of them to me, but then, of course, she wouldn't. My brother and I were very close—unmarried sisters are often very much attached to their brothers, I think—and Hilary would understand that my sympathies over the divorce were entirely with him."

"Yes, of course. O-ho!" said Dame Beatrice.

"I beg your pardon?"

Dame Beatrice waved a yellow, much-ringed hand.

"I beg your pardon. A passing thought only. Will you be kind enough to show me the Chelsea address?"

Shown it, she copied it, in her neat, illegible, medico-legal calligraphy, into a small, morocco-covered notebook. Then she said:

"What I have to ask you now, Miss Beads, may give you a shock. Would it surprise you very much if I told you that your niece has not only disappeared but may be dead?"

Miss Carnelian Beads stared at her. Then, her face very pale, she said:

"Are you telling me that she *is* dead?"

"A body has been found in Northumberland. The police may contact you. I take it that they have not already done so?"

"No, they have not. You mean they might want me to. . .?"

"Identify the body. Yes, that is what I mean."

"No, no! I couldn't do that. I am not the next of kin, as I've told you. There are her mother and her sister. In any case, I could not possibly leave my hotel and take a long trip like that!"

"If the police need you, I am afraid . . ."

"There are others," said Miss Beads very firmly. "The police must contact *them*. I thought, though, that the police might want me to account for my movements."

"Your movements?"

"Well, it would be only common sense, wouldn't it? My niece plans to visit me on the Saturday before she embarks for America. Instead, she leaves the place where she has been staying and disappears. Now you tell me that she may be dead. What position does that put me in?"

"Are you *able* to account for your movements?"

"Certainly I am. That's one advantage of a public position. One has plenty of witnesses."

There was a little desultory conversation over the tea-cups and then Dame Beatrice took her leave. She was back at the vicarage by half-past six.

"Hilary Beads did not intend to go to Bournemouth on that Wednesday," she said. "Such, at any rate, is my opinion. I think she kept a tryst with someone else. Did anybody except yourselves know that she had announced her intention of visiting her aunt on that day?"

"I don't think anybody else knew. There was no reason for us to mention it, and I don't suppose *she* told anybody. I don't believe she knew anybody here but us."

Laura had not come back by the end of the week. Veronica, returning on the Saturday from an outing with small Hamish, who had been promised a walk in the woods, brought a bit of news which, she thought, might have some significance. It chanced that Saturday afternoon was a half-holiday for the little boys of Pelican House Academy, and the woods were alive with them. Veronica was popular with

the children and soon she and her charge had a talkative, cheerful escort.

"I say, Mrs. Pierce," said Simon, "wasn't it jolly dee, that skeleton turning out to be murdered?"

"I prefer not to discuss that," said Veronica.

"It was an awful swindle, us having to give it up to the police," said Andrew, not in the least put out by this heavy attitude. "It would have been super to have a murdered *modem* corpse in school."

"It was an awful swindle not finding it ourselves, though," said Simon. "Fancy its being wasted on the vicar and that man who knocked Sysko's heel on! He looked like an artist or something. He stopped that Miss Beads who was staying at the vicarage. I expect he was asking the way or something. Of course, we only saw them in the distance, but they stopped and talked a bit."

"How do you know she was staying at the vicarage?"

"Well, she sat in church with you, Mrs. Pierce, and she couldn't have been staying anywhere else because there isn't anywhere else, and, anyway, she walked back with you from church, too, because our crocodile followed you. Some of us sing in the choir, as you know, so we come away from church later than the other people, and we saw both of you."

Dame Beatrice listened with great interest to this seemingly artless recital, and, at the end of it, made no comment, so Veronica said:

"Don't you think it's significant that the Carmichaels met Miss Beads here?"

"It is certainly interesting. I wonder what made Simon notice them?"

"He's a noticing sort of kid. Besides, Phlox's get-up is usually rather striking, and then, apparently, he put back the heel on Simon's shoe."

Dame Beatrice, whose own get-up was also usually rather striking, for she possessed no sense of colour at all,

did not comment on this observation. She said:

"My instinct may be misleading me, of course, but I think I should suggest to Robert Gavin that he pays some attention to the period during which the Carmichaels were in the village but were *not* staying at the vicarage."

"Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and most of Saturday morning of the week in which we may presume that Hilary Beads disappeared," said Veronica. "Let's ring him up at once."

"There is no need. Robert rang me while you were out with Hamish. He will be at my house in time for dinner and will be staying until he has concluded the next stage in his enquiries."

"Oh, good! Hamish, your daddy's coming home."

"Coming home," said Hamish, with a curt nod. "Bringing puppies."

"Really? How exciting! Are you sure?"

"Coming home; bringing puppies; two, six, nine, three, one puppies, all for Hamish."

"One puppy is the way to say it. What shall you call it?"

"Hamish."

"You can't have two Hamishes in one house."

"His name," said Hamish firmly, "is Hamish."

"And that's that," said Dame Beatrice. "Hamish is his father's son."

"Hamish," said the last-named, looking up from the tower of bricks he had been patiently building up, "is a very good boy. I like him."

"Pelion on Ossa!" said Dame Beatrice. Hamish glanced at the clock.

"He says 'Cuckoo' for tea-time now," he observed. The cuckoo clock obligingly struck five. Hamish stood up, kicked over the tower he had so painstakingly constructed, and added dispassionately, "The puppy will eat you all up."

Laura left Newcastle early on the following Monday morning, and brought news that the inquest had been adjourned and that there was going to be some fun when it was resumed, as the police doctor declared that the corpse had been dead for at least four months and probably longer.

"As, of course, it couldn't have been," declared Laura roundly. "We know for a fact that Hilary Beads was alive on May the twenty-first, because she didn't leave the vicarage until May the twenty-second. Still, it wasn't my business to contradict him. I *know* it was Hilary Beads. The BBC broadcast for her nearest relative, and some elderly female who said she was her mother turned up to identify the body. The woman was half fainting, I'm told, but said at once that it was Hilary. Oh, the police doctor was wrong. It's quite easy to mistake the length of time a person has been dead. It depends on all sorts of circumstances. Besides, it *must* be Hilary Beads, and the Carmichaels are guilty. Work it out for yourself. First of all, there's the *locale* where the body was found. We *know* the Carmichaels walked the Wall. We know the route they took."

"We know nothing of the route they took, once the driver of the hired car had set them down and they were out of his sight, and you are jumping to conclusions much too readily," declared Dame Beatrice.

"Well, I think it all fits much too well to be wrong. And, if the corpse *isn't* Hilary Beads, she's in America and can be traced, and that will settle it once and for all."

"We know now—we have known since I returned from Newcastle without you—that Hilary Beads is *not* in America. We have been in touch with her aunt whom she had promised to visit before she embarked."

"Not in America? Then there you are!" said Laura, in great triumph. "I'm right and the police doctor is wrong. Inexperienced, probably. I don't suppose he's seen all those many bodies which have been exposed on a Northumbrian moor."

"It is the Northumbrian moor which troubles me," said Dame Beatrice. "One is apt to think in terms of time and mileage."

"Time and mileage?"

"Exactly. Consider the facts: we know that Hilary Beads did not leave the vicarage until after tea on the Wednesday. Phlox and Marigold Carmichael established themselves at the vicarage after lunch on the following Saturday. That only left Phlox Wednesday night, all day Thursday, all day Friday, and Saturday morning to murder Hilary, transport the body from place unknown (but Wandles Parva must be regarded as his base) to Northumberland, hide it in those bushes which can only be reached on foot, return here, and establish himself and his sister at the vicarage. I suppose it *could* be done, but . . ."

Laura screwed up her nose. She was a reasonable being, on the whole, and a highly intelligent one.

"Oh, Lord !" she said. "Have we really gone and identified the wrong body? Poor Gavin *will* be pleased when he has to unravel all that!"

As it turned out, Gavin had nothing to unravel. It was established that the woman had been struck on the head at a considerable distance from where she had collapsed and died, and that what had struck her was a falling small boulder. The body was never correctly identified, but that was not Gavin's business.

CHAPTER TEN

Robert Gavin Comes to Stay

“. . . my humble speculations have another Method and are content to trace and discover . . .”

Ibid (Section 13)

“THINK aloud as you brood darkly on the psychology of Phlox Carmichael,” said Laura, after dinner that night. “Light your cigar, Gavin, and listen. This is important, in spite of what I’ve done.”

Detective Chief-Inspector Robert Gavin crossed one nylon-covered ankle over another and obediently settled himself with his cigar.

“So you really think the Carmichaels are involved with that skeleton?” he said, in a tone that stated a fact rather than asked a question.

“Well, what do you make of this?” asked Dame Beatrice. “He came to me of his own freewill, by the way, so . . .”

“So he asked for what he’s going to get,” said Laura.

“I tested him by asking, not for the first word which came into his head as a reaction to the word I chose to give him, but for the second one.”

“Crafty work—not that I understand psychiatry except in the most general sort of way. How did you expect it to work?” asked Gavin.

"As it did work. He could have had time to think, you see, and, to a guilty mind, time to think can be fatal. Of course, I also followed the usual technique of watching for the unusually long pause."

"And it came?"

"Yes, it came."

"Was it—did it suggest anything definite to you?"

"Taken in conjunction with other answers and with a piece of information which I possess in common with Laura, the late (I am afraid) Hilary Beads, and the Pierces, it was very suggestive indeed, so I do hope I have interpreted it aright."

"It's of no use, at this stage, to ask what your interpretation is, I suppose?"

"You know it isn't," said Laura. "She hasn't *proved* anything yet."

"It might help my enquiries, though, if I had a line to go on. Come on, Dame B."

"Hear the evidence which Phlox Carmichael has offered against himself and check your deductions with mine."

"All right, so long as you explain the psychological mumbo-jumbo."

"Disrespectful," said Laura. "Kindly remember that you are speaking to my boss, and keep a civil tongue in your head."

"Right. I apologise."

"We began," said Dame Beatrice, "with the statement by Mr. Carmichael that he was suffering from hallucinations. He said that he 'saw things'—a condition which one usually associates either with mental derangement or with alcoholic excess. However, I came to the conclusion that neither of these factors affected the situation, so I drove out Marigold Carmichael and went to work. I may add that Mr. Carmichael was as anxious as I was to be rid of her."

"He didn't feel he needed her moral support?"

"Most obviously not. When she had gone, he confided to me that he was haunted by the ghost of Calpurnia."

"Julius Caesar's Calpurnia?"

"The same. A woman, if you remember, haunted equally by irreproachable virtue and bad dreams. 'Help, ho! They murder Caesar,' in fact. Then he told me that he had attended a Polish psychiatrist (whose case-notes he did not understand), because his nerves were adversely affected by the war. He saw angels with swastikas on their wings."

"Good heavens above!"

"Black hells below, I should think!" said Laura. "You said he wasn't mentally deranged. How do you make that out?"

"By the fact that there was nothing insane about the responses to the actual word-test. I took down the answers and have considered them closely. My belief is that he had decided to challenge me. He was determined to find out whether, or to what extent, I was dangerous. There is no doubt he knew of my double life, so to speak . . ."

"Psychiatrist and detective, you mean?"

"Yes."

"He must have been a fool to think he could challenge you and win."

"He is a mass of conceit, but I am not so sure that he is a fool. I suspect him of being a double murderer, but there is nothing yet to prove it. I began with a gambit-word."

"The sort of word to which any number of responses are possible?"

"Exactly so. The interest, to the enquirer, is to see which one will be selected. After that, I proceeded on the sound-track principle, switching suddenly to a word which had nothing to do with the meaning of the previous one, but which had a certain sound-association with it."

"What was the gambit-word?"

"'Trainer,' to which he responded with 'cub.' Someone, in his youth, I surmise, had called him an 'unlicked cub,' an expression which he has forgotten because it in no way

reflects his picture of himself and yet the sting remains in his subconscious mind."

"So, that time, he did not give you his second thought, but his first one."

"As I believe he did throughout the test, but for the one significant pause I mentioned to you. I think—and this is where he showed himself to be intelligent—I think he realised he dared not pause to select the second word instead of the first that came into his head, for fear of giving something away which he did not want to disclose."

"So the pause is all the more important?"

"Because it was entirely involuntary and therefore argues a sense of guilt, yes, very important indeed."

"What happened after 'cub'?"

"I said 'cubist' to which he responded with 'mathematics' and I pounced on this with 'Attica.' This, to him suggested, not 'cellar' as one might have supposed, but 'salon.' I played this off with 'Macedon' and obtained from him 'Russian salad.'"

"What a party game this would make! What was your come-back to that one?"

"'Saladin,' of course. There he returned 'doctor.'"

"Must have read *The Talisman*."

"Yes, it was an innocent enough answer. I then took my sighting shot and fired at him 'Tory Alexander' to which there was an obvious response and he made it. He said, 'Hymn.' That was what I wanted. I gave 'her' and that was where he boggled, to come out, in the end, with the word 'charwoman.' That ended the test, so far as I was concerned, but it would have aroused his deepest suspicions had I stopped short at that point, so I gave him a couple more meaningless leads and charged him five guineas for the session."

"So he's got guilty feelings about some woman—in other words, about Miss Beads."

"Not about Miss Beads, I fancy."

"Oh, you mean about the skeleton which was found on Dickon's small-holding."

"I do mean that. I also have a theory about the reason for Miss Beads' disappearance."

"Both points on which we're working," said Gavin. "So far, there isn't a clue. Is it possible for you to tell me what it is that you and Laura and the Pierces know, and that Miss Beads also knew?"

"Certainly, although whether you will make the same deduction from it as I have done remains to be seen. The Carmichaels always insist on occupying separate bedrooms."

"Well, they're not unique in that, surely? Lots of couples occupy separate rooms."

"Yes, but, taken in conjunction with the finding of the skeleton and with the disappearance of Hilary Beads, it seems to me that I am justified in my conclusion that they insist upon separate rooms because they are not married."

"Oh, but, there again—I mean, that isn't particularly unusual these lax days, is it?"

"Be your age," said Laura. "It's a long sight more extraordinary for an unmarried couple to want separate rooms than it is for a married one, I should say. After all, if you're not married and get to the stage of not being able to stand the sight of one another, there are no formalities to be observed. You just say 'Toodle-oo' and separate. You don't even have to pay anything."

"The Carmichaels, far from not being able to stand the sight of one another, are a very devoted couple," said Dame Beatrice.

"Perhaps one of them's got suspected T.B. or something," suggested Laura.

"That would cover the facts as outlined, of course. But, if it does, why has Hilary Beads disappeared?"

"Obviously, they've shut her mouth," said Gavin. "But, if Laura's right, what harm could it have done if she *had* told

people? Of course, I suppose it could have been a less respectable disease than T.B. Is that what you think?"

"I have not subjected either of them to a medical examination, of course, but I would be prepared to stake my reputation as a doctor that the Carmichaels are both perfectly healthy people. I simply believe them to be brother and sister and I believe, further, that their mutual affection is perfectly innocent and is the love which members of families often, most fortunately, have for one another, a comfortable, friendly, satisfying emotion, undemanding and comradely, but, all the same, remarkably deep and strong."

"But Phlox does boss Marigold about," objected Laura.

"So do most older brothers treat their sisters. It is but an assertion of the masculine ego and springs largely from a desire to protect the sister. Brothers are notably more protective than husbands."

"So the skeleton is that of Phlox Carmichael's wife," said Gavin. "It would explain a lot if that's the truth—and I can see you think it is. He murdered her and then looked to his sister to make a home for him. It's odd, though, that so black a character should have sufficient thought for his sister to take this frightful risk about the separate rooms. People talk so much about that kind of thing that you'd think he'd realise that someday someone would stumble on the truth."

"The risk was not as great as you might suppose. The Pierces would not discuss their paying guests in any way which could give offence nor to anybody who might make mischief, and the hotels at which the couple stay would be very unlikely to comment or to encourage gossip. On their house-boat the Carmichaels can live as they please without people being the wiser."

"But if they *have* killed Hilary Beads, why shouldn't they kill the Pierces?" asked Laura. "Or you and me, if they realised we knew about the rooms?"

"I can answer that one, provided that Dame Beatrice is right," said Gavin. "I think a little police work in Chelsea might be occupying me for a day or two. It would be interesting to know whether the Carmichaels ever lived there."

"You're both being most annoying," said Laura. "What's all this about Chel . . . Oh, yes, of course. Hilary Beads lived there, so if you can show that the Carmichaels also lived there, and that she could have met them and known them as brother and sister, whereas to the Pierces they were passing themselves off as a married couple . . ."

"Clever work," said Gavin.

"What do we do while you're in Chelsea?" asked his wife. Gavin looked at Dame Beatrice.

"I wish we could find out how long the Carmichaels have had that house-boat," he said. "Then, when I get back, we can check dates and times and maybe get something to carry us on a bit farther. But be careful how you go, won't you? If we're on the right tack, it will be dangerous work to go snooping round in that neighbourhood. On the other hand, I'd rather not arouse suspicion by sending a policeman."

"I shall manage," said Dame Beatrice. "There is no need for anyone to return to the neighbourhood of the house-boat unless it so happens that Mrs. Pierce cannot help us."

"You mean she'll have letters from the Carmichaels asking for accommodation at the vicarage? Would she keep them all that length of time?"

"I have no idea. Most probably not. However, we shall see. When do you propose to visit Chelsea?"

"Tomorrow."

"Then I will ring up the vicarage right away and ask the Pierces to dinner. We can easily steer the conversation round to the Carmichaels."

"Good."

“You’ll stay to dinner and spend the night here, too, of course?”

“Thank you, Dame B. I should like to. I’ll ring up my opposite number in Culminster as soon as you’ve done with the telephone and tell him to expect me in a day or two, when I’ve been to Chelsea.”

Dame Beatrice rang up the vicarage and then went into details of the dinner-party with her cook and his wife. It proved a simple matter, over the meal, to steer the conversation in the desired direction and Gavin learned, without discontinuing his own conversation across the table with the vicar, that the Carmichaels had occupied their floating home for the past two years or a month or two more, and had previously lived somewhere in London. The actual locality had never been specified, except that it was ‘somewhere on the river.’ They had a small motor cruiser, too, but had sold it when they bought the house-boat higher up the river.

“I think I’ll suggest I go with Gavin. You wouldn’t mind looking after Hamish for a day or two, would you? And I’m panting for a bit of real detective work,” said Laura, later, to Dame Beatrice.

Gavin made no objection to his wife’s accompanying him to Chelsea, and George drove the two of them into Southampton next morning immediately after breakfast. Two and a half hours later they were lunching in Soho and then a taxi took them to Cheyne Walk.

“Trouble is,” said Laura gloomily, as she stared at the river, “that Phlox may have changed his surname and, in this part of the world, oddities are two a penny, I suppose. You’d have to go about naked to get yourself even so much as noticed. Or do you think we’re barking up the wrong tree and there’s no connection between the Carmichaels and Hilary Beads at all?”

“What I do think is that there’s a pretty big floating population here,” said Gavin, “and we may not be lucky

enough to strike any of the old stagers who might remember the Carmichaels. You see, if Dame B's hunch is right, and Phlox Carmichael did do his wife in and is passing his sister off as his wife, we can't get much further until we get a description of the wife. It's got to be obvious that she isn't—or, I suppose I may mean, *wasn't*—Marigold Carmichael. If only we could get reliable evidence of that, we could ask Carmichael for an explanation, but I can't haul him in on the strength of Dame B's psychological deductions. There'd be the devil to pay."

"What about the fact that they never seem to have given Mrs. Pierce their London address? Isn't that rather fishy?"

"It could be, but, there again, you couldn't prove anything from it. According to what Dame B. has told me, it was entirely accidental that the Carmichaels stayed at the vicarage the first time. They simply called there to ask whether anyone in the village could put them up."

"Yes, and Mrs. Pierce said they could stay with her. I suppose they were neat and clean about the house, didn't pinch the spoons, paid up promptly and well, so she had them to stay more than once."

"Quite. And, you see, lots of people are casual about writing for digs in places they've stayed in before. They just telephone or maybe they drop a postcard and don't bother to put their full address at the top."

"What about postmarks?"

"Not at all satisfactory as evidence. For one thing, they're not always clear. Then, I've often had letters and postcards from friends living in the country and yet the postmarks are London ones simply because the husband happens to work in Town or the wife's posted the thing when she's been in London for a shopping binge."

"What about trying the boat-owners? People at moorings *always* know one another."

“Yes, I’d thought of that. Trouble is, more than half these people are never on their boats when they’re wanted. Still, we can try. All the same, I’m going to make some more enquiries at Hilary Beads’ flat. We’ve had it gone over in a routine way, of course, and found nothing helpful, but now we’ve got this idea that she and the Carmichaels may be connected, I can ask a different set of questions from the last lot. You’d better stay out of this. I can be a policeman here. You’ll get your chance when we do the boats.”

Laura loitered for twenty minutes or so, strolling about a quarter of a mile along the Chelsea Embankment, stopping frequently to gaze at the river, and then retracing her steps. Gavin rejoined her and gave a brief smile and a shake of the head.

“Nothing doing,” he said. “I think the people are quite sick of the police and, really, one can’t blame them. They’re perfectly innocent and have had to put up with considerable fussation since Beads’ disappearance. They don’t recognise in the slightest my descriptions of the Carmichaels. I’m sure there’s nothing to be gained there. We’ve been through all her things so thoroughly that I didn’t bother any more. What hasn’t been found in that flat already simply isn’t there. Oh, well, let’s see whether the boats contain any dark secrets.”

But nobody he hailed had anything to tell him. One elderly man, rather deaf, obligingly climbed into his dinghy and rowed to the steps in order to hear what Gavin had to say. When he had denied knowing anything about a couple named Carmichael, Gavin said:

“He might—the man—have got himself into some kind of trouble and decided to change his name. He’s—you describe him, Laura.”

Laura obliged with a slightly highly-coloured picture of Phlox Carmichael and followed it with one of Marigold. The elderly man shook his head.

“When you talked about the *man* I almost thought I might have seen him around,” he said, “but the young

woman might be anybody.”

“That’s quite true,” Laura agreed. “She doesn’t stand out in any way.”

“Hm! Look here, I’ll row you over to old Jack Plinlimmon’s boat. He services all of us. *He’ll* know this Mrs. Carmichael, if anybody does.”

Old Jack Plinlimmon, in a sailor’s jersey of oiled wool and a battered yachting cap, was fiddling with a small outboard motor and continued to tinker with it during the conversation. When he had been given the descriptions of Phlox and Marigold, he spat overside and asked:

“Why do you want to know about them for?”

“We want to trace them,” Gavin replied.

“For why?”

It seemed time to come clean, so Gavin said:

“The police would like to put some questions to them.”

“Oh, so you’re a nark, are you?”

“Not so much a nark as a genuine Dixon of Dock Green. In other words, I am a police officer and I believe that Mr. Carmichael may be in possession of some evidence which will help me in the case on which I’m engaged.”

“Well, / can’t help you, Mister George Dixon. Nor you, Sergeant Grace Millard. Supposing as my information was wrong and I got innocent people into trouble?”

“If they *are* innocent, there’s no fear of that,” retorted Gavin. The old boatman laughed sardonically and spat over the side again. “Come on, now,” Gavin urged him. “Nobody said anything about trouble and I’ll certainly respect any confidences you give me.”

“Like hell you will!” returned Plinlimmon. “Well, you won’t get the chance, see, Mr. Copper, because I don’t know nothing to tell you.”

“Well, if you don’t, nobody does, Jack,” said the elderly boat-owner, “so I think I’d better put this lady and gentleman ashore.”

"And no hard feelings," said Gavin, pushing a ten-shilling note into the brown hand which was holding the outboard motor. Plinlimmon looked up.

"See here, mister," he said, "I say I don't know nothing, and I *mean* I don't know nothing. Try the Fulham li'bry. Not Chelsea. Fulham."

"Would you say that my ten bob bought a valuable hint, or was that last crack merely the old chap ventilating his sense of humour?" asked Gavin, when they stood on land once more.

"We're no worse off if it was the latter," said Laura. "Besides, when he said that, a light flashed on in my brain. Unfortunately, it flashed straight off again."

"Come, girl, think!"

"All right. Don't talk, then. Flag that taxi. I've no idea where the Fulham library is, have you?" The taxi received instructions and drove off in the direction of Walham Green. "Incidentally, I think we've proved one thing," said Laura, after a lengthy pause.

"Not if the old chap was only leading us up the garden, you know," argued Gavin.

"Ah, but I don't think he was. He may be sending us on a wild-goose chase now, but he recognised the description of Phlox all right. If you ask me, he's been bribed to keep his mouth shut."

"Maybe and maybe not. However, we seem to have arrived at the public library. Have you seen the light again?"

"Books, books, books!" said Laura, as she stood on the pavement while Gavin paid the taxi fare. "Of course! Eureka!" she exclaimed, to the surprise of an American Air Force officer who happened to be passing. Gavin joined her.

"Stop shrieking in the street. You'll get us pinched," he said. "What now?"

"Guide books—reference department—they were always trotting off somewhere. Try Egypt. I know they went there not so long ago."

"Wouldn't they *buy* a guide book for that?"

"Yes, probably, but they'd look at the stuff in the library first, I expect, to see what to buy."

"Oh, well, it's worth trying. Will you do the talking?"

"If you like. Friends of ours—understood them to say they'd come here for advice and to look at books and maps? That do?"

"Quite. Babble a bit. Woolly-headed enthusiasm brings home the bacon even better than a display of erudition and specialised knowledge when a woman seeks information from a man."

"Right. This way, then."

Laura did not use the technique her husband had indicated because the librarian in charge of the reference department, a large, particularly well-stocked one, happened to be a cool, quiet-voiced young woman with an Oxford accent.

"Books on Egypt?" she said. "Oh, we have numerous enquiries, I believe, but I've only been here a few months, so, if your friends left the district more than two years ago, I shouldn't know them."

"Checkmate," said Gavin softly. Aloud he asked, "Is there anybody here who could help us?"

"There's a catalogue you can look at, and it's part of my job to give any help I can. Will you look at the catalogue first?"

"Please. Does it include books in the lending library?"

"I can always let you look at books from the lending department, if they are in."

"Oh, well, I'll leave my wife to look round here for a bit. Shan't be long, dear," he said to Laura. "Shall I find you here when I get back?"

Laura said that he would, and began to browse among the books. She had realised, as soon as he did, that the lending department of a municipal library keeps records of its borrowers' names and addresses. If Phlox and Marigold

had been borrowers, therefore, there would be a card to prove it.

So Gavin went off and returned to find Laura immersed in an ancient Baedeker. He seated himself beside her, pulled a more modern travel book towards him, and opened it at random.

“No Carmichaels on the books,” he murmured, “but the chief librarian thought he remembered Phlox from my description. Unfortunately, that isn’t much good, as he couldn’t put a name to him and said that he thought he used the reference library only.”

“What can we do, then?”

“Electoral registers, here and in Chelsea. If their names aren’t there, we’re stymied.”

The young librarian rustled papers in an irritable way, caught Laura’s eye, and nodded meaningfully at a large placard which indicated that silence was to be observed. Laura looked apologetic, touched her husband’s arm, and they slunk out.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dame Beatrice Acts Independently

“. . . those highly magnifie him, whose judicious enquiry into his Acts, and deliberate research into his Creatures, return the duty of a devout and learned admiration.”

Ibid (Section 13)

THE electoral registers, consulted at the Post Office, did not get them any further, either.

“A complete blank,” said Laura. Gavin disagreed.

“Anything fishy is never a complete blank.”

“I meant that we’ve come to a dead end here,” Laura explained. “What do we do next?”

“Police station. Our fishy friends may not have a police record, but it will be hard luck if somebody doesn’t know something about them.”

“We’ve only the grudging evidence of that old boatman chap to suggest that the Carmichaels ever lived here, you know, and he may have been either pulling our legs or genuinely mistaken.”

“I’ll try him again—officially and with lurid threats—if I don’t get any help at the station.”

“He *must* know the name they went under, if he serviced their boat. Oh, of course! What lunatics we are!”

“Speak for yourself, woman. What’s biting you?”

"Can't we find out the name under which they bought their house-boat?"

"It would most certainly have been Carmichael. But your words have rung a bell, all the same. We might be able to find the name under which they sold their motor cruiser, or whatever it was they had here."

"We're placing a good deal of reliance on that old man's hint, aren't we?"

"All we've got to go on at the moment. Anyway, you leave him to us. We'll sort him."

"When?"

"The morn's morn. I'll telephone Dame B. and tell her I'll stay in London for the night. Do you prefer your own bed in Kensington, or would you rather get back to Wandles and come up here again tomorrow?"

"Do I get dinner at the Dorchester?"

"If I can get a table."

"Kensington, then."

Early next morning they were back in Chelsea. Of the boatman there was no sign. They made enquiries, but no progress. He had slipped away from the moorings. That was all.

"So there *is* something nasty in the woodshed," said Laura cheerfully.

"We must get after him," said Gavin. "You go back to Wandles and see what the Dame thinks of doing at that end, and I'll stay up here and set the bloodhounds on this fellow Plinlimmon."

Laura drove herself back to Hampshire after a lonely lunch in Soho and arrived at the Stone House to find that Hamish had been taken to the vicarage to be tended and fed, and that Dame Beatrice, according to Henri and Célestine, had taken George and the Jaguar to go off very early in the morning to a destination unspecified.

"Pollarded Reach, I expect," said Laura. "Wonder whether she'd like me to go along? She didn't say anything

when she took our telephone call last evening.”

“Madame made no wishes,” said Célestine. “She calls for Georges and they depart.”

“Which way?”

“For Southampton, it seemed to me.”

“That means that house-boat all right. Be an angel, Célestine, and go and collect Hamish from the vicarage. I bet he’s played Mrs. Pierce up. He always does. I don’t know why she asks to have him.”

With a brief retort that Hamish was an angel—a flagrant distortion of fact which, in order to avoid argument, Laura allowed to pass unchallenged—the Frenchwoman departed to get ready to go on her errand. Laura took her motor-scooter from the garage and was soon making a somewhat noisy progress along the Southampton road.

Meanwhile Dame Beatrice was at the riverside home of Phlox and Marigold Carmichael, engaged in the risky but exciting pastime of taking the bull by the horns. She had taken the chance of finding the couple on their house-boat and had not been disappointed. They had left the vicarage on the previous day and, for once, were not on their travels.

“I hope,” she said, “that I shall not need to detain you very long.”

“It is a great pleasure to welcome you,” said Phlox, his expression indicating that it was nothing of the kind. “We are, as always, entirely at your disposal. Won’t you come on board and sit down?”

Dame Beatrice accepted this invitation to enter the spider’s parlour and was given a deep basket chair in the saloon, from which, she realised, it would not be easy to get out in a hurry.

“Now?” said Phlox, seating himself in a commanding position on the table. “Sit down, Marigold, for goodness’ sake!”

The crude exclamation betrayed his state of mind, Dame Beatrice thought. It was out of character for him to be

discourteous, at any rate in public. She said:

"I have come, of course, in connection with the disappearance of Miss Beads and the discovery of the skeleton of an unnamed woman on Dickon's smallholding."

Phlox seized on the operative word.

"You say 'unnamed,' I notice; *not* 'unknown.' Is her identity known?"

"Not with any certainty. It is in an attempt to dispel what, for want of a more exact definition, I shall call 'rumours,' that I am here."

"Rumours?" Phlox repeated the word and, at the same time, flicked his fingers at Marigold, forbidding her to speak. "Such as?"

"Such as," said Dame Beatrice, fixing her sharp black eyes on his, "that you two are brother and sister, not husband and wife."

Phlox again signalled to Marigold that she was to leave the conversation to him.

"So what?" he asked, flicking a speck of fluff from his golden-yellow corduroy trousers.

"Interesting," commented Dame Beatrice. "There must be a reason for it, of course."

"Yes, there is." He uncrossed and re-crossed his long legs. "It is an arrangement we came to some years ago when we were travelling in far Arabia. Several times I received well-intentioned hints to sell my sister to a sheikh, and, to save embarrassment all round, I found it desirable to present her as my wife."

"Simple, admirable, and intelligent," said Dame Beatrice, "but it does not explain why the Pierces also take you for a married couple."

"Do they? I don't know why. We always insist on separate rooms and do not behave in any sort of sentimental manner, I believe. In any case, since the rumours can do us no possible harm, I do not see why they need to be dispelled, particularly by one who—forgive me—

can have no possible concern with what is, after all, our own business."

"I would say 'touché' but for a further rumour," said Dame Beatrice, placidly accepting the obvious setting-down which she had received.

"And that is?" Phlox drew a box of cigarettes towards him, selected one with exaggerated care, tapped it on the box, put it between his lips, and struck a light from a jar of harlequin matches. Dame Beatrice waited until this performance was concluded; then she said:

"The further rumour is that the skeleton found on Dickon's smallholding is that of your wife."

There was a brief silence before the muzzled Marigold released the tension by falling forward in a dead faint. Phlox was on his feet in an instant. Dame Beatrice's movements were more controlled, but she rose from the deep chair with a celerity many younger women might have envied and crossed the unstable floor of the house-boat which, at the moment, was being rocked by the wash of a passing river-steamer. She stood looking down at the brother and sister. Phlox was now on his knees, raising Marigold's limp head.

"Slowly," said Dame Beatrice. "It's all right. She's coming to."

"She can't stand shocks," said Phlox. "Would you be kind enough to get me the brandy out of the sideboard? And then some water, please. There's a tumbler on the draining-board in the scullery."

Dame Beatrice complied with these requests and soon the colour was back in Marigold's rather characterless little face and she was apologising for "being so very foolish, but I'm emotional—Phlox will tell you."

"You had a shock, silly girl," said Phlox. "It was hearing Dame Beatrice remark upon something we have discussed between us—that, having been present when the—that ugly thing was found, we might be thought to have some connection with it. There! Lie back and relax. You'll be all

right now. You are still suffering from the inquisition of the police, that's what it is."

"I'll get Dame Beatrice some coffee," said Marigold feebly. Dame Beatrice waved a skinny claw and said that she must be going.

"Well, we must thank you for the information about these malicious rumours," said Phlox. "I'll just see you ashore."

"No, no. I can find my way," said Dame Beatrice firmly. She lost no time in leaving them and walked ashore to find Phlox's neighbour on the bank. Phlox immediately disappeared. The woman laughed sardonically.

"I've been keeping guard," she said, "ever since I spotted you going aboard that lazar-house. One scream out of you and I should have been there with my little hatchet." She waved it proudly. "I don't trust that couple. No dirty work they're not capable of putting across. Yes," she continued, raising her voice, "I know you can hear me, you couple of murdering devils. You know what I think of you, well enough! Dog-killers! Child-drowners! Blood-suckers!"

Dame Beatrice cackled and began to move towards her car in which George, the chauffeur, sat like a statue. Her protector accompanied her, carelessly swinging the axe.

"It was good of you to think of my welfare," said Dame Beatrice. "Good-bye. I look forward to meeting you again."

"Don't go yet," said the woman. "I'm quite sane and normal in the ordinary course of events. It's just that those two get my goat—*him* particularly. Otherwise my bark's much worse than my bite. Ask anybody on the Reach; they'll tell you."

"There is something I'd like *you* to tell me," said Dame Beatrice, conscious that a curtain in the Carmichaels' houseboat had been drawn slightly aside and that she and her companion were being watched. "How does one set about acquiring a boat and hiring moorings on this stretch of the river?"

"Fellow called Tompkins will fix you up. Across the bridge, past the garage, you'll see his place. Tompkins. I don't think there are any moorings vacant at present, though. Still, no harm in asking. So long, then. Be seeing you!"

George opened the door of the car and his employer got in, waved a skinny, ungloved claw, and settled herself.

"Home, madam?" asked George.

"Ultimately. When we are across the bridge, look out for the name *Tompkins*. It may be on a boat-house and it may be over a shop."

"Very good, madam."

Tompkins' place proved to be an open shed containing rowing boats, a pram dinghy, two canoes, and a racing skiff. By the side of it was a small office through the window of which could be seen a man smoking a cigarette and making entries in a ledger. George descended and tapped on the window. The man removed the cigarette and placed it in the saucer he was using as an ashtray. He put the top on his fountain pen, opened the window, and said, "Well?"

"Mr. Tompkins?"

"Ah. Want to hire a boat?"

"No. Madam would like a word with you."

"Madam?"

"Dame Beatrice Adela Lestrangle Bradley," said George impressively.

"Who's she when she's at home?"

"Squire of the village of Wandles Parva in Hampshire."

"What's she want?"

"You had better ask her, mate," said George. He turned on his heel and walked back to the car. "A difficult subject, this man Tompkins, madam," he said. "I don't know what you'll make of him." He opened the door of the car.

"We shall see," said Dame Beatrice. She walked to the window. "I shall not take up much of your time, I hope, Mr. Tompkins," she remarked to the face at the window. "May I

come in?" She entered the shed. Tompkins cleared some clutter from a chair.

"Sit down, mam," he said. "If it's moorings, I can't do you nothing until them Carmichaels sells their boat."

"I have just been visiting them, but they said nothing about selling."

"Matter of fact, they ain't said nothing to me neither. I've heard at second-hand from the people who's got the next moorings."

"Wishful thinking on their part, perhaps, don't you think?"

The man gave her a sharp glance and their eyes met. He nodded, picked up the cigarette and gave a thoughtful pull at it.

"Could be, I s'pose. I dunno about wishful what's it, but I do know there's been nothing but trouble since they been there. Complaints? I ain't had nothing else but. What they thinks I can do about it beats me. They don't break no laws and the rent for the moorings always a month in advance. You can't turn away people like that."

"I suppose not. How long have they been here?"

"Matter of two years."

"Not more than that?—and already thinking of selling? Where did they come from, I wonder?"

"Why, from your part of the country, mam. The Hamble-River, so they said."

"Really?"

"Well, that's what they *said*. I don't know no more than that."

"Whom should I approach if I wanted to buy a house-boat?"

"Hereabouts you'd likely hire one. But I tell you there ain't none to hire because there ain't no moorings."

"I quite understand. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Tompkins. Perhaps I'd better try nearer Maidenhead."

"Staines way is nice—Laleham and that. Or Twickenham. You want to look around a bit before you decides. If you care to leave your address, I'll let you know if there's any more talk about them Carmichaels going."

"Oh, I'm in touch with them, as I told you," said Dame Beatrice. She turned away as two people came up to hire a boat. Just as she reached the car, a motor-scooter pulled up beside it.

"I suppose you haven't bothered about lunch," said Laura. "There's still plenty of time. Can George ride the scooter home and will you let me drive you into Maidenhead or Henley?"

"No. I would rather go to Oxford. It will be much quicker. On the way we will exchange information and air our theories."

So George rolled sedately away on the scooter, after having been charged to get himself some lunch on the way home, and Laura drove the Jaguar to Oxford and recounted the abortive tale of the Chelsea Embankment.

"So Gavin *may* get somewhere on his own, or he may not. My bet is that the police will find this old boatman all right, but will get nothing out of him," she said in conclusion.

"It almost looks to me as though the Carmichaels were never resident in Chelsea," Dame Beatrice observed. "On the other hand, I find it difficult to believe that they had a house-boat on the Hamble River."

"Why?"

"I hardly know, except that, if they had, one would have thought it unlikely that they would opt to put up at our vicarage, unless, of course, they had the same reputation on the Hamble as they seem to have made for themselves on the Thames."

"There's that. Have you visited their Reach today?"

"I have gone further. I have visited *them*."

"Good heavens! Why?"

"To find out whether they are brother and sister and not husband and wife."

"Stuck your neck out, in fact."

"If I understand your idiom, I suppose you are right."

"Did you get any satisfaction?"

"An interesting question. Phlox Carmichael admitted freely that he is Marigold's brother and not her husband."

"No!"

"Oh, yes. He seemed to challenge me to do something about it."

"Then the skeleton *is* his wife, as we thought!"

"That does not follow in the least. You are illogical. He gave a valid reason for passing Marigold off on one of their expeditions as his wife and indicated that if people in England chose to sustain the fiction, that was not his concern."

"The hotel!" said Laura. "The hotel on the Roman Wall where they stayed before they came on to the vicarage this last time. What's the matter with pushing along up there again and having a peep at the register? If he's put them in there as man and wife, he's got some explaining to do."

"You can do that, if you like, but I think you will be wasting your time."

"You mean he'll have played safe and entered them as brother and sister?"

"He will have filled in his own particulars and left Marigold to fill in hers. As it is optional whether one adds the title "Miss" or "Mrs." to one's signature, Marigold will have added neither. Therefore, as they will have asked for separate rooms, the inference will be that they are, in fact, what they are—brother and sister."

"He's clever, there's no doubt about that. What *shall* we do, then?"

"We must approach the matter from another angle."

"What other angle?"

"We must find out how and when the cadaver was brought to the smallholding."

"The police are working on that already, I thought."

"Yes, they are."

"What we want now, you know," said Laura, "is a bit of real good luck; one of those fortunate coincidences that never seem to happen."

"I do not expect anything like that; in any case, most so-called coincidences prove to be nothing of the sort, but are readily accounted for."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"To employ your own distasteful expression, I am going to snoop around the village and turn up the damp stones, so to speak."

"If I know anything of village life, you'll get more than you bargain for."

"I shall discount strictly anything which has no bearing upon our problem."

"Where do you propose to begin?"

"Well, we have exhausted everything the Pierces can tell us, I fancy. I shall try the boys' school again and then the convent school."

"I can't see much future in that."

"One never knows. Then, of course, I shall harry that unfortunate smallholder again."

"I expect you'll be a nice change from the police. By the way, has it been proved yet whether those finds Dickon made are genuine Roman stuff?"

"They are being examined by the British Museum experts now, I believe. It is interesting that you should mention them, as I intend to make them my excuse for visiting the school again. In fact, you know, I think I might try the convent first, so that, by the time I get to the boys' school, the experts will have come to some conclusion about the pottery and the mask."

"Meanwhile, what do you want *me* to do?"

"Keep in close touch with Robert. I expect developments from the Chelsea end of the case. That old boatman has not disappeared for nothing."

"No, but the police will find him all right."

"Yes, but, when they do, will he be alive or dead?"

"Goodness! You don't think there's been *another* murder?"

"I do not know, but it is an eventuality for which I feel we must be prepared. Ring up the convent, will you, and find out when it will be convenient for the Mother Superior to allow me to talk with the headmistress."

Laura rang up, and an interview was arranged for the following afternoon at three. The headmistress, Mother Anacletus, was a round-faced, blue-eyed, cheerful woman in her mid-forties. She received Dame Beatrice in her school office and invited her to smoke. Dame Beatrice confessed to an antipathy to the weed, and stated her business frankly and concisely.

"I don't know how we can help you," said the nun. "It is a dreadful affair, but our girls cannot be said to be involved."

"Of course not, but they may have noticed something which others have overlooked."

"Young people are naturally observant, and I hardly think our girls would not have reported anything which seemed to have a bearing on this fearful crime. I wish we had been able to keep the dreadful facts from them, but that has not been possible. They have access to newspapers and they also shop in the village—under supervision, it is true, but . . ."

"Quite. You cannot prevent them from overhearing gossip."

"We understand that the poor man on whose land the body was found has been closely questioned by the police. Is it to help him that you are interesting yourself in the matter?"

"Partly. I am also extremely interested in the amateur archæologists named Carmichael. I don't suppose you have met them."

"Oh, but we have, Dame Beatrice! That is to say, we have certainly met *Mrs.* Carmichael. She stayed here just before she and her husband went to the smallholding with Mr. Pierce and made that gruesome discovery."

"Really?" said Dame Beatrice. "I had no idea of that."

"Yes. She told us of the difficulty about accommodation at the vicarage and asked whether we could take her in. As it happened, two of our secular teachers were away on a school journey with some of the younger pupils, so we were able to find her a room. She occupied it for three nights—a very quiet, amiable person."

"Did she leave the convent at any time during her visit? Did she take walks, for example?"

"No, she did not. We have a delightful garden, you know, and Sister Paracletus found her books to read."

"You called her *Mrs.* Carmichael?"

"That is how she introduced herself. She also referred to her husband and told us that he was staying at the station inn, but that he considered it unsuitable for her. Very thoughtful of him, I imagine. The company there might be noisy in the evenings."

"Very likely. It is a very small place and I dare say the principal guest-rooms would be over the bar. Well, if you do not think your girls can help me, I will wish you good-day. I am sure you are busy."

The nun smiled very sweetly and opened the parlour door.

"Sister Portress will see you out," she said. Dame Beatrice dropped some money in an offertory box on the wall, and Sister Portress, emerging from an alcove, thanked her, blessed her in a business-like way and showed her out. Dame Beatrice got into her car and told George to drive to the station inn. Something was beginning to move at last,

she thought, although in what direction it was not yet possible to say. **chapter twelve**

CHAPTER TWELVE

And Continues So to Do

“. . . for obstinacy in a bad Cause is but constancy in a good.”

Ibid (Section 25)

THE station inn had not been open to the thirsty since half-past two that afternoon, so Dame Beatrice went in at the double gates which led to the yard and knocked on the back door. A large, very hairy, cross-bred dog rushed to the limit of his chain and barked loudly and menacingly at her. This, and her knocking, brought the potman out. He cursed the dog and greeted the visitor.

“I’m afeared I can’t oblige ‘ee till six, mam,” he said. “There was a bit of trouble last week.”

“That’s all right, Percy,” returned Dame Beatrice. “I haven’t come for anything in a bottle. I want to see Mrs. Palmer.”

“Come in, mam, please. I’ll put you in the bar parlour and then I’ll fetch her along.”

Mrs. Palmer was a Saxon blonde with powerful forearms and an equally powerful jaw. She was well acquainted with Laura, who often looked in for a beer or some Scotch, less so with Laura’s employer, although she knew her very well by sight. She entered, wiping her hands on a very nice nylon overall.

"What can I do for you, Dame Beatrice?" she asked.
"Not often we have the pleasure."

"I need take up very little of your time, Mrs. Palmer,"
Dame Beatrice returned, with equal courtesy.

"Time for a small port, any road, unless you'd prefer a dark sherry. Either goes nice after dinner, and I've only just this minute finished mine. I reckon to have my elevenses at half-past ten—that's bread and cheese or a ham sandwich and my half-pint of nourishing stout—and then I go till we shut at half-past two, then I have my dinner."

Dame Beatrice opted for dark sherry. Her hostess chose for herself what she described as "a nice drop of real old tawny" and placed biscuits on the table.

"Now," said Dame Beatrice, "this is what I came about: you had a man named Carmichael staying here for three nights just before the vicar took him and his wife to Dickon's smallholding and they found that woman's skeleton."

"Carmichael? For three nights? No, Dame Beatrice, that we did not. He always stays at the vicarage with his wife. Three or four times they've stopped there."

"Not on this occasion—at least, not for the three nights in question. His wife lodged at the convent and he took a room in your house."

"Which three days would it have been, then?"

"I think it would have been—let me see—yes, it would have been a Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, the twenty-second, third, and fourth of last month."

"No, I'm certain, Dame Beatrice, he never came here those nights. Look, there's no call to believe me unsupported. I'll just ring that bell to call my husband. I know he'll say the same as me."

"Of course I believe you, Mrs. Palmer! There is really no need . . ."

"All the same, we'll have it straight," said the landlady, with all the obstinacy of a country woman. "I'm a-going to ring the bell, then you'll be satisfied."

Dame Beatrice herself rang the bell and in a few moments Palmer, tousle-haired and in his shirt-sleeves, came in.

"What is it, mother? We're in the cellar making room for the rest of the draught. Won't it wait?"

"I'm sorry you're busy, Mr. Palmer," said Dame Beatrice. "It's only a small point and your wife has really cleared it up. By the way, it may be important that this enquiry of mine should not be discussed."

"Don't worry about that, mam," said Palmer. "Why, if we repeated all we heard in this house we should soon be out of business. What did you want to know?"

"Whether a Mr. Carmichael stayed here last month."

"The Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, Ted, twenty-two, twenty-three, and twenty-four," put in his wife.

"Not to my knowledge, and I reckon I should have knowed. Or did you hide the gentleman under the bed, Millie?" said the landlord.

"I was certain he didn't come here," said Mrs. Palmer to Dame Beatrice, "but I wanted you to have Ted's word on it as well."

"Well, thank you both very much, and thank you for the sherry, Mrs. Palmer. You must send me up a couple of bottles. Delicious!"

She drove straight back to the Stone House and telephoned Gavin in his office at New Scotland Yard.

"Didn't sleep at the Wandles pub on the night Hilary Beads was supposed to go to her aunt's in Bournemouth, where she never turned up?" said the Detective Chief-Inspector. "Sounds like another nail in his coffin, but there may be some innocent explanation. By the way, our chaps found the boatman—the Chelsea one, you know. Drowned, after he'd been knocked on the head. The river police got him at low tide off Chiswick Eyot, and there's no sign, as yet, of his boat. We shall find it, though. It may tell us quite a lot. I'll get down to Wandles as soon as ever I can—maybe

tomorrow afternoon. Meanwhile, stay away from the Carmichaels and keep Laura away from them, too. They *may* be all right, but, with two deaths and a disappearance to investigate, I don't think we ought to take chances."

Dame Beatrice, having no reason for wishing to encounter the Carmichaels again at that particular juncture, made the required promises and, omitting the formality (to her) of taking afternoon tea, drove to Bournemouth to see Hilary Beads' aunt.

"Did you ever hear your niece speak of some people named Carmichael?" she asked.

"Not that I remember," said the boarding-house châtelaine. "But her visits were very few and far between, as I think I told you. I never knew so casual a girl. Worse than her sister! Why, even when I wrote back when she told me, months ago, that she was going to America, inviting her to come here and see me before she went, I didn't get any sort of answer. I told you that, too, if you remember."

"Yes, you gave me much to think about on that occasion," said Dame Beatrice. "No wonder you thought nothing of it when your niece failed to visit you, and you would have continued to think nothing of it, but for the cables from America."

"Have the police found out anything more about poor Hilary's disappearance?"

"They are working on it. We now know, as I wrote and told you, that the body found in Northumberland wasn't hers, but I am afraid we should be unduly optimistic if we assumed that your niece is still alive."

The aunt nodded.

"It's an awful thing to have in the family," she said, "murder. It's such a *dirty* thing. Murders shouldn't happen in families such as ours. We've always been so respectable." She blinked hard and was obliged to find a handkerchief. "Pardon, I'm sure," she said. "I don't indulge as a rule."

"I'm sure you don't," said Dame Beatrice, gently.
"You've been quite wonderful over it all. And there's nothing more you can tell me; that's quite clear. Oh, yes! There is one small point. You have mentioned a sister. Married, I think you said."

"Yes, that's right. Mildred. Older than Hilary by a couple of years."

"Whom did she marry?"

"I never heard the name. I wasn't even invited to the wedding, as I told you."

"Are you certain you never heard the name of the husband?"

"I don't recollect it."

"How did you hear about the wedding?"

"From Hilary, at some time, I suppose."

"Well, now, Miss Beads, have you any idea *why* your niece was going to America?"

"Just for a holiday, so she said."

"What was her financial position?"

"I don't know what she earned out of that marriage bureau, if that is what you mean."

"Had she any other source of income?"

"I don't see how she could have had, except her few books. She went to boarding-school on a scholarship, and my brother could only make her a very small allowance while she was there. As a matter of fact, I paid for her clothes myself."

"It seems rather ungrateful of her not to have visited you more often."

"Oh, people are like that," said Miss Beads, shrugging them off. "I wasn't a bit surprised. I think, really, she was a bit ashamed of me keeping a private hotel. I don't really blame her."

"A broad-minded, almost noble, sentiment."

On this note, Dame Beatrice took her leave. The conversation had been fruitful. As George drove her back to

Wandles Parva and the Stone House, she was thinking deeply and putting various questions to herself. These included some to which, at the moment, answers still had to be found.

Phlox and Marigold Carmichael had arrived in Wandles Parva knowing perfectly well that the vicarage could not accommodate them for at least two, and possibly three, days. Why, then, had they come to the village on the Wednesday instead of the following Saturday?

Secondly, if one suspected them of having brought the skeleton to Dickon's smallholding in order to bury it there, how could they have known that the small boys of Pelican House Academy and the tall girls from the convent school had obtained permission to dig where Dickon's Roman finds had materialised?

Thirdly, following on this, supposing that they had been able to find out that this enthusiastic digging was to be done, how could they have found the time to cash in on the digging—not knowing, in that case, that the vicar would insist upon digging there again—by planting the skeleton there?

That they could have known of Dickon's pot and mask was unarguable. The vicar's wife, in writing to put off their visit to a later date, would almost certainly have mentioned the finds.

Dame Beatrice, who had seen a considerable amount of daylight already, began to see some more. It remained to try the Hamble River, although Dame Beatrice had already decided that little was to be gained in that quarter.

The most important question, and the one which she always came back to, was that of where the skeleton could have been hidden before it had been brought to Dickon's smallholding. There were all sorts of possibilities and of these Dame Beatrice considered two. It could have been hidden, perhaps (she was most doubtful about this) somewhere near, or even on, the Carmichaels' house-boat,

and brought from there to Wandles Parva, or it could have been hidden in or near Wandles itself.

Then there was another question which, so far, had not been answered. This involved the theory that, if Phlox Carmichael was responsible for producing and burying the skeleton, he might have recognised Hilary as a potential enemy. This could have several repercussions if it were true. For one thing, there was always the possibility of blackmail. In that case, the murder of Hilary Beads, if she were a blackmailer, was capable of a rational interpretation. She was too dangerous to the Carmichaels to be allowed to live. So far, so obvious, but could the obvious theory be translated into fact?

The car arrived at the Stone House while she was still pondering. George came round to the rear door of the car but as he held it open she shook her head and told him to take her to the vicarage. Some of the points she had raised in her own mind could be cleared up there, she hoped.

The vicar and his wife were both at home and seemed very pleased to see her. The police, it appeared, had been visiting them again and had only just gone. They had asked a great many questions about the finding of the skeleton and the visits of Hilary Beads to the vicarage.

"I believe they think we are involved in the murder and in her disappearance," said Veronica, in a troubled tone. "If it weren't so wildly ridiculous, it would be a bit frightening. Do stay to dinner and let us have some amusing conversation."

"Unfortunately," said Dame Beatrice, "I have come upon the same errand as the police. I have come to ask questions. What is worse, they will probably be the same questions."

"Oh, well, you'll ask them in a beautiful voice, and without a Hampshire accent, anyway," said Veronica in a resigned tone. "Sit down, please, and have some sherry. Get it out, Gascony, will you?"

They settled themselves in the comfortable and (thanks to the paying guests) far from shabby dining-room and, sherry having been supplied by the vicar, Dame Beatrice was invited to begin her catechism.

"There are several things I'd like to know," she said, "but I'm not at all sure that I'm going to learn very much from you."

"Close as oysters," said Veronica. "A good thing you know it. Fire away."

"There is one thing in particular—a question to which there is a definite answer."

"Let your yea be yea, and your nay be nay."

"Don't be flippant, dear," said the vicar.

"Which of you wrote the letter to the Carmichaels to postpone their visit here?"

"I did," said Veronica. "Guilty."

"Did you mention the finds on Dickon's smallholding?"

"Yes, of course. I knew they'd be interested."

"Did you suggest a specific date for their arrival here?"

"Yes—Saturday, May 25th. I always take bookings from Saturday to Saturday, if I can, and it seems to suit most people."

"Then—but this is a question I do not expect you can answer—why did they choose to come to Wandles on Wednesday, May 22nd?"

"I haven't a clue," said Veronica. "What do *you* think, Gascony?"

"I have no notion at all, my dear. It does seem a trifle odd, when one comes to think of it."

"It certainly is. They've a home, after all. Of course, they *did* know about the Roman finds. I suppose that's what brought them down here."

"Did they go to Dickon to see the finds, though?"

"No. There was no suggestion that they should go. It was an accidental meeting with Mr. Colson and his boys which took them to the smallholding."

"You know, the more you think about it, my dear, the more inexplicable it becomes," said the vicar.

"What I should like to know," said Dame Beatrice, "is where Mr. Carmichael spent the nights of that Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday while his sister was staying at the convent."

"At the *convent*? His *sister*?" exclaimed Veronica, gazing in fascination at Dame Beatrice.

"Well, there's nowhere else in the village for a person like Marigold to stay, except here," said Mr. Pierce, looking perplexed. "Are you sure, though, that she stayed there?"

"Mother Anacletus is my source of information. What I am certain about is that there was some good reason for the separation of the brother and sister on those particular nights."

"Oh, there must have been. They go everywhere together."

"I don't see any good reason," said Veronica, "except the obvious one, Gascony. You said yourself, just now, that the convent is the only other place near here where anybody could stay. As it was not possible for Phlox to put up there, he did the best he could; he got a room there for Marigold. He himself probably slept in Farmer Meggs's barn, or stable loft, or somewhere."

"I return to my former point. The mystery still remains. Why did they come here at all for those three days?" demanded Dame Beatrice.

"Yes, it does seem perplexing," the vicar agreed, "but, of course, they're rather odd sort of people. It was probably just a whim."

"At any rate, it has given me something to go on," said Dame Beatrice. "I can visit Mr. Meggs and ask him whether Mr. Carmichael stayed there."

This plan she carried out at once; it had the result which she had anticipated. Phlox Carmichael had never stayed at the farm.

“So now to find out where he *did* stay,” said Veronica, when Dame Beatrice called back to give the negative news. “Gascony, *you* could do something about that, with your contacts in the village.”

The vicar looked horrified.

“My dear girl, it is no business of mine,” he said. His wife shrugged and then she winked at Dame Beatrice to indicate that one person in the vicarage could be relied upon to secure any information which the village might be able to give. Dame Beatrice, however, stated baldly that she preferred to question the villagers herself.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Help from the Village

“What a strange vision will it be to see their Poetical fictions converted into Verities, and their imagined and fancied Furies into real Devils!”

Ibid (Section 55)

VERONICA PIERCE, although not an acute psychologist, was sufficiently knowledgeable about the villagers to have realised that anything as exotic as Phlox Carmichael would hardly have escaped their notice. Her theory, therefore, that some of them might be aware of his actions during the time that Marigold was staying at the convent, was a likely one. Dame Beatrice thought, however, that the police enquiry might have been effective in causing the villagers to retreat into their shells in the face of questioning and probing.

She decided to begin with the village school and to ask to have a check made on absentees. As she had given away the prizes and attended the school concert at the end of the Christmas term, her advent and her request were equally well received by the headmistress, who was in charge of the top class of the primary school, the second grade being taken by an uncertificated teacher and the infants having their own teachers of the five-to-six- and seven-to-eight-year-olds. There were no longer any secondary school

children in the building. These were conveyed daily to town by motor-coach.

Dame Beatrice leered kindly at the top class and then turned her back on them to talk to the headmistress.

"You keep registers, of course," she said. "It is important that I should find a child—preferably a boy, as I find them, on the whole, to be more enterprising and to have a wider range than girls—who played truant (to put it bluntly) on Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday on the twenty-second, twenty-third, and twenty-fourth of May."

"I've had no note from Eustace Trumble's parents, and he was absent, rather suspiciously—weren't you, Eustace?—on that Thursday."

"Come here, Eustace," said Dame Beatrice, turning to the class and fixing a tubby little boy in a green jersey and brown corduroy shorts with a basilisk eye. Eustace blushed, and crossed glances with his teacher. She jerked her head, so, with an expression of sullen gloom, he left his desk.

The interrogation was carried out in the playground and resulted in an interesting and, possibly, an important picture. At the end of morning school Eustace had gone home, had been given cottage pie and green peas, followed by bacon pudding and a saucerful of strawberries, and had told his mother that dinner had been smashing and had volunteered to help with the washing-up.

Reading between the lines, Dame Beatrice saw this item of self-sacrifice as a libation poured to the gods to quieten Eustace's conscience.

"So, when you offered to help your mother," she said, "you had already made arrangements to miss afternoon school."

Eustace gulped, but, as this was made as a firm statement and not presented as a question, he appeared to think that denial would be useless.

"I'll get the cane," he muttered.

“Not unless you tell me lies,” said Dame Beatrice (who, in point of fact, would as soon have thought of pushing a child into the fire as of caning it), “and, if you did tell me lies, I should know. Now, speak out, Eustace, and fear nothing, for I will stand between you and retribution. Let us sit down on this form while you tell me exactly where you went, what you did, and whom you saw,”

“The lot?”

“Every single thing. Leave nothing out and put nothing in. On this occasion, necessity is *not* the mother of invention. Now, then: you left home and, realising that your mother was watching you, went off in the direction of school until you knew you were out of her sight. What did you do then?”

“Went over the Stone,”

“By yourself?”

“I met my mate over there.”

“Oh, yes? Well, go on. Is your mate in school today?”

“Naw. He’s left. He’s seventeen.”

“Harvey Load? Isn’t that his name? I’ve heard of him.”

“He said he’d take me fishing.”

“Where?”

“He said he’d never taken me again if I told anybody.”

“He *said* he’d take you fishing. Did you actually go?”

“Us went, but us come away again.”

“Tell me exactly what happened.”

It appeared that the Stone—by tradition a place where human sacrifices had once been offered—had been appointed as the meeting-place because it was, at the same time, a landmark in a well-wooded countryside where obvious and unmistakable landmarks were few, a secluded and sheltered spot and, what was of equal importance, one which lay in the opposite direction to school.

“So you had to double back after you were out of sight of your home? How did you manage that?”

“Through Johnson’s spinney.”

"Ah, yes, of course, the bridle path among the trees. And when you met Harvey at the Stone, what then?"

Then they had spat on the Stone for luck and had left the woods for the river, some mile and a half away, a clear chalk stream preserved for most of its length and strictly privately owned.

"You reached the river, then, and began to fish."

At this statement the boy burked. They had had no chance to fish, he insisted, because they had *seen a man*.

"Someone you knew? Someone who would realise that you had no right to be there?"

"It was that man as stays sometimes with the Reverend."

"Describe him."

But this was beyond the child's power, so Dame Beatrice asked whether the man had been wearing sandals.

"Naw, not sandals. He was barefoot."

"Was he wearing a hat?"

"Yes, a gennelman's 'aat."

Further enquiry led to the supposition that the gentleman in question had been wearing a panama, and this fact, coupled with his choice of lodging, made it probable that he was Phlox Carmichael, but this was not certain.

"What was the gentleman doing? Was he fishing?"

He was not fishing; he was trying to push something under the water. It looked like a lady's handbag. Just then the boys had spotted the river keeper and had lost no time in making themselves scarce, as, although there was a public footpath at no great distance from the river bank, Harvey was carrying a rod and Eustace the fish-basket he had woven during the winter, so that things, for them, looked suspicious.

"Do you know whether the man managed to push the handbag under the water?"

Eustace did not know. He and Harvey had made themselves scarce before they had had time to see what had happened to the handbag. Dame Beatrice returned him to the schoolroom and suggested that his absence on the afternoon of May twenty-third should continue to be ignored. "And," she added, turning again to the small boy, "you may tell your friends everything that has passed between us. I want no secret made of it."

She left the school and went to the cottage of the river keeper. It was five miles outside the village, on the bank of the river to which, if Eustace was to be believed, a lady's handbag had been consigned by a man who might have been Phlox Carmichael.

The cottage was not far from where the river made a wide bend. Trees grew thickly on the opposite bank, but around the cottage and as far downstream as Dame Beatrice could see, there were tall reeds and occasional willows. The cottage itself had a large, well-stocked garden in which the owner had a henhouse and a pig-sty. She walked up a long path bordered by flowers and had no need to knock on the door, for it was wide open and the keeper's wife was within, busy with ironing.

"He's out cutting weed, mam, if it's John you're wanting," she said, "but he shouldn't be that long, if you'd care to come in and wait."

Dame Beatrice accepted this invitation and her hostess disposed of another couple of garments, replaced the iron on the hob, observed that the fire could die down for a bit, as there was always the oil stove nowadays, and spread a cloth on the table.

"I am wondering," said Dame Beatrice, "whether your husband ever retrieved a handbag from the river a mile or two higher up."

"Handbag? Oh, ah, he did get a handbag out. Was it yours, then? I can show it to you, mam, but I reckon it ent much good no more."

"It is not mine, but I think I may know the owner. I should be very glad to see it," said Dame Beatrice.

"It's out the back, in the woodshed, where John puts any old junk he finds," said the woman. "I reckon I can lay hands on it right away. It was a pity as anyone should lose it, because it must have been a very good bag before it fell into the water. Was you fishing, I wonder, when you lost it?"

She did not wait for a reply, but went into the garden and round the side of the cottage. Dame Beatrice also stepped into the fresh air, as the little room, in spite of the fact that the door had been kept open and that the fire was being allowed to die down, was uncomfortably hot and close. She was in time to see the river keeper tie up his punt, so she walked down the path towards him.

She and the keeper had never met, although Laura knew him well. He greeted his visitor respectfully, but with reserve. She lost no time in telling him why she was there.

"A lady's handbag? And Mother's finding it for you? Ah, that was a fair knock-out, that was. I caught a glimpse of the feller that was a-drowning of it, but he was off before I could catch up with him. When I fishes the bag out, there weren't nothing in it, excepting a bit of sodden pasteboard which I found tucked in a tear in the lining, so what he was a-doing. with it is more than I can say. But here's Mother with it, so ee can examine it for yourself, mam. Take it, if it's any good to ee, but I reckon the water has done for it."

Dame Beatrice took the dilapidated object which the wife handed to her, and asked for the bit of pasteboard, but the keeper had thrown it away, so, having thanked the pair warmly, she walked back to where she had left George and the car. She got in and was driven to the village.

"Stop at the vicarage," she ordered. During the short journey she opened and examined the bag. It told her nothing at all, but when she was admitted by the Pierces' parlourmaid and showed the bag to Veronica, it was recognised immediately.

“Why, you’ve got Hilary Beads’ handbag! She had it with her when she visited us this last time. Oh, dear! Wherever did you find it?”

“Would you be prepared to swear that this bag belonged to Miss Beads?” asked Dame Beatrice.

“It’s hand-made and I know who made it. *She’d* swear to it all right—and that’s Iona Piatt at the other end of the village. I persuaded Hilary to patronise her a couple of years ago.”

Dame Beatrice knew Iona Piatt. She was an ardent Church worker, less for orthodox religious reasons than because it gave her a certain status in the village and a social life. She was a spinster said to have been crossed in love. She was not of uncertain age, having been in receipt of the Government Retirement Pension for the past year. She was hale, hearty, and a semi-vegetarian. That is, she ate butter, cheese, fish, and eggs but had long since discarded meat from her diet because it was expensive. She had a small bungalow with a very large garden from which she sold produce in the form of vegetables, fruit, and flowers to motorists passing her door, and she used the largest room in her dwelling as what she preferred to call her studio. It was knee-deep in sea-shells, raffia and cane, skivers, and tubes of adhesive. If she received an order for leatherwork, she obtained payment in advance.

To her repaired Dame Beatrice and had no difficulty in getting the handbag identified. She explained how she had obtained possession of it, knowing that if she did not release this information, Miss Piatt would suffer from insomnia.

“But how could she have been so careless as to drop it in the water?” the craftswoman exclaimed, holding the bag with both hands and smoothing over the ill-used leather with her long, strong thumbs.

“The supposition is that she must have been robbed of it, the contents extracted and the empty bag thrown away.”

“But it was such a beautiful bag! Quite my best work!”

"It was because it was hand-made and so delightfully decorated and finished that the thief was certain it would be recognised if he kept it," Dame Beatrice explained.

"Oh, I see. But it does seem a pity, doesn't it?"

Dame Beatrice agreed that it seemed a very great pity, and added:

"It must have been stolen by someone living in or near the village. I suppose you do not recollect having seen anybody behaving in a suspicious way recently? Mrs. Pierce informs me that Miss Beads had the handbag with her when she stayed at the vicarage this last time."

"That means—why, Dame Beatrice, that means that she may have—have met her death in or near this very village!"

"That is the conclusion I have reached, but we are far from being able to prove it—or that she is dead."

"The Stone!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"The Stone of Sacrifice! That's where it was done!"

"I'm afraid I don't follow you." (A white lie, but Dame Beatrice felt that it was completely justified.)

"I saw him there with Miss Beads!"

"Whom did you see?"

"That strange, tall man in sandals and a panama hat."

"Did he see you?"

"Oh, no. It was too evidently an assignment that was being kept. As I knew that the man was married, I felt that my presence might be an embarrassment to both of them. Also, as a Churchwoman (sometimes, I believe, known as the vicar's right hand), I should have felt greatly embarrassed myself if I had remained a spectator of what was tantamount to an immoral love-tryst."

"What gave you the impression that it was anything of the kind?"

"Both faces wore an expression of guilt and defiance."

"And from this you deduced . . .?"

"Exactly; so I lost no time in making myself scarce. I was fortunate. I believe I escaped seeing two dreadful sins committed."

"The second of these being . . .?"

"Murder, Dame Beatrice; no less."

"And when was this?"

"I should have to look up in my diary. Quite a little while ago—several weeks—it would have been. Excuse me. I'll go and get it. I keep it on my bedside table and confide in it each night when I go to bed."

She returned with a pretentious volume. It had a brass clasp which she unlocked with a tiny key kept on a chain around her neck. Dame Beatrice had always supposed that the appendage to this chain would prove to be a small gold cross and was interested to learn that it was not.

Iona Platt turned back the pages and found the one she wanted. The date of the meeting between Phlox Carmichael and Hilary Beads was Wednesday, May 22nd.

"At what time of day did this meeting take place?" enquired Dame Beatrice.

"Oh, at about half-past six. The vicar keeps Cathedral times for week-day evensong, and I had attended it at three-thirty, was free by a quarter-past four, came back here for some tea, began a little work, and then realised that I was short of fern."

"Fern?"

"For my shadow-pictures, you know. So I popped along to the Manor woods to re-equip myself and—there they were."

"So that was that," said Dame Beatrice to Laura when she returned to the Stone House. "I see no point in interviewing the Huckleberry Finn of these regions, Harvey Load."

"Neither do I. What do we do next? Visit the Stone of Sacrifice and look for clues?"

“Clues will have disappeared by now, even supposing that any existed, but it might be interesting to visit the Stone.”

“Incidentally, why is this called the Stone House? Is there any connection?”

“I have never thought about it, but the question I find rather stimulating. I must look into the matter with Mr. Pierce. He is our foremost authority upon the local history.”

“There’s the curator of the Bosbury museum, too—not to mention the Culminster man.”

“Very true. We will interrogate both. Tomorrow, then, we will take another look at the Stone of Sacrifice. It is some time since I have seen it.”

“Before my time, anyway,” said Laura. “As far as I know, you’ve never been near it since I came here—and that’s some years ago!”

“Shades of Felicity Broome, Aubrey Harringay, James Redsey, Rupert Sethleigh, and the monumental, although strangely nervous, Mrs. Bryce Harringay of shocking and rewarding memory,” said Dame Beatrice, in the quietly gloating tones of rich reminiscence.

“Really? Tell me more.”

“At another time I shall be happy to do so. Fortunately, since the Manor Park is open to the public, we need acquaint no one with our intention to visit it. Be prepared to accompany me at ten tomorrow morning.”

The park of the Manor House, which lay some two miles out of the village, was thickly wooded, being, in point of fact, a segment cut (probably illegally, if the truth were known) from the New Forest itself. Although, since the death of the last owner, the park had been acquired by the County and the house permitted to fall into decay, the property had never become a popular playground, even for the village children. This was not surprising. An eerie gloom enveloped the place, even in the sunniest weather, and a previous owner had not improved the heavy, almost doom-laden

atmosphere by planting an inner circle of pine trees around the Stone of Sacrifice.

Laura and Dame Beatrice made the journey to the wicket-gate (the only public entrance to the park) by car, and left it parked on a grassy verge at the side of the road while they continued their pilgrimage on foot. Laura pushed open the wicket-gate and held it open for her employer to pass through, and then latched it carefully before following Dame Beatrice along the narrow, winding path between the trees.

"Gosh!" she said, as the great deciduous woods appeared to close in on them, "I don't wonder people don't come here very much. I suppose the vicarage is about the nearest house to this, by a short cut, isn't it? Wonder how they like being so close?"

"There are strange and ghostly stories," said Dame Beatrice, in a sepulchral tone which caused her graceless secretary to laugh. This laugh, however, "must have hit the trunk of a tree or something," said the startled Laura, for it came back at her like that of a disembodied spirit. It impressed her so much that she followed in silence, on the leaf-mould dampness of the path, until they emerged into a small circular clearing where, encircled by the rigid trunks of the pine trees, was the infamous Stone of Sacrifice.

"Was it really used for human sacrifices?" asked Laura, gazing at the flat-topped, triangular mass of granite. "I wonder where it came from?"

"Probably from Glamorgan or Milford Haven. It has an affinity, I am told, with the so-called Altar Stone of Stonehenge. There is a theory, too, which was propounded to me once by the curator at Culminster, that this circle of pines was planted in the eighteenth century by a friend of William Stukeley to mark the monoliths which once stood there, and which, at some time, had been carted away for building purposes. I am pretty sure there is one forming the lintel of Miss Platt's cottage, for example."

“You know,” said Laura, stepping forward and running her finger-tips over the rough and oddly chilly surface of the Stone, as it crouched among the pines like some eyeless monster, “all you say makes me think of Phlox Carmichael. That sort of thing—sacred rites and mystic incantations and so forth—seems right up his street.”

“So much so,” said Dame Beatrice, “that he may also know more than he should about the interior of the Manor House.”

Laura’s eyes widened.

“You don’t think *that!*” she said. “Have you ever been inside the house?”

“As a matter of fact, I have—and not by invitation either, so far as my memory serves me,” said Dame Beatrice. “And that reminds me—although I don’t know why it should—that I must reward little Eustace Trumble for his information about the drowning of the handbag.”

“‘We must punctually pay our spies, or we shall get no information,’” quoted Laura solemnly. “Half a dollar should do it.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Two Ladies Go for a Swim

“The World was made to be inhabited by Beasts, but studied and contemplated by Man.”

Ibid (Section 13)

DAME BEATRICE sent Laura home to the Stone House while she herself visited the vicarage. This time she found the Reverend Gascony Pierce in residence. This was lucky, as she felt sure that he would know more about the activities of the Carmichaels on their visits to Wandles Parva than would Veronica.

She opened the conversation by enquiring after the vicar’s Alpines, a fine collection which he had inherited from his predecessor, an eccentric, absent-minded man named Broome.

“Nicely, nicely,” said Mr. Pierce. “What a pity we were not given the opportunity of purchasing some of the very fine specimens they used to have at the Hall, though! I understand that it was one of the finest collections in the country.”

“The Hall?—oh, yes, the Manor House, of course. Laura and I have just been having a look at the park.”

“And at that terrifying and disgusting Stone of Sacrifice, I imagine?”

“Oh, yes. Laura, who had not seen it before, (I’m sure I don’t know why), was greatly impressed. She wondered whether there was any possible suggestion of a connection between it and my house, which, after all, is only partly faced with stone.”

“I have never heard of any connection. Strangely enough, Carmichael once asked me the same thing, I remember, when he was here for the first time. As soon as I learned that he was interested in (among many other things) prehistory, I mentioned the Stone of Sacrifice to him and took him along to have a look at it, but I don’t think he ever went again.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Oh, he would have mentioned it. He is a great talker and used to describe to us all their little expeditions and experiments. The old tower fascinated him, though. By the way, I’ve acquired some Alpine campions, soldanella, and the aromatic wormwood to add to my erica and my lady’s-slipper orchis and my saxifrages, and I really need somebody to admire them.”

Glad to close the subject of Phlox Carmichael and the Manor House, Dame Beatrice duly admired the new Alpines, promised the vicar a gift of a plant of yellow violet, and found George with the car at the vicarage gates.

“You shouldn’t have bothered, George. I was quite prepared for a meditative walk,” observed his employer.

“Thank you, madam,” said George, with the wooden expression he assumed to indicate disapproval. “Mrs. Gavin suggested I return for you, but I should have done so in any case.”

“George, you talk too much.”

“Very good, madam.” George relaxed his features, tucked her in, and drove her home. Very early next morning Laura woke up, tiptoed into the dressingroom where her son had his cot, found him peacefully asleep, and tiptoed back again. She looked out of the window, stretched her fine

limbs, and thought of her morning bath. The time was just after five o'clock and it seemed anti-social to risk waking other people by rushing water into the bath and gurgling it out again, so, very reluctantly, she was considering a return to the bed she had just left, when another idea struck her.

She slipped trousers and a heavy sweater over her pyjamas, pulled on socks and tennis shoes, picked up a towel, and made her way cautiously downstairs. She let herself out by the side door and was soon at the garage. Here she retrieved her motor-scooter, pushed it down to the gate so that no sound of its engine should disturb the household, started it up, and rode as far as the wicket-gate path which led to the Stone of Sacrifice and the Manor House.

She had anticipated that the walk between the trees would be less eerie in the early morning than it had been in the early evening, but this, she discovered, was not the case. She was not in the least fanciful (although, in some respects, she was extremely imaginative), but a long line of Scottish ancestors—she had been born into Clan Menzies, which, although admittedly of Lowland origin, has been Highland since the time of Alexander I—had bred in her some powerful and alarming superstitions and a tendency to smell the uncanny long before an Englishwoman would have suspected its presence.

The path between the trees, therefore, she traversed at a jog trot, although her tennis shoes had little grip on the damp, deep leaf-mould. She looked neither to right nor to left and was soon in sight of the Stone. Here Laura stopped dead in her tracks. Lying face downward on the Stone, his head towards the apex of its triangular top, his legs spread-eagled so that one foot pointed directly towards each of the angles at the base, was a man whom she had not the slightest difficulty in recognising as Phlox Carmichael.

Laura had to make a lightning decision. She made it. She stepped to her right and was hidden—"swallowed-up"

was the way she put it to herself—by the closely-growing trees. There she thought the position out again, but decided that she had done the right thing. She waited as long as her impetuous nature would allow her to do so, and then crept onwards towards the Stone but still in the shelter of the trees. From the base of the triangle on which he was lying she contrived to obtain another glimpse of Phlox. As far as she could see, he was in exactly the same position as that in which she had first seen him, so she not only did not loiter but actually hurried past the spot. Phlox did not move.

Calm, and ineffably inviting, the lake, whose existence she had hoped for and yet had not wholly expected, gleamed in an enchanting setting of reeds and willows. Laura had a deep sense of purpose. Having come prepared to swim, she was determined to swim, no matter how many possibly murderous Carmichaels were infesting the grounds of the Manor House. In the shelter afforded by a great bed of reeds, she stripped and, with mud squelching between her strong toes, she entered the water. The lake was nowhere more than four feet deep, but that sufficed to make swimming a pleasure.

After she had warmed up, Laura floated on her back and studied the environs of the lake. It was not far from the house, the only original feature of which, so far as she could judge, was the tall observation tower put up by a previous owner in the eighteenth century.

“Must be a marvellous view from the top,” she thought, turning over in the water and paddling idly up the length of the lake. “Might be an idea to try to get up there at some time. And thinking of time . . .” she glanced at her watch, an expensive, waterproof, sub-aqua affair which she had bought for under-water swimming at the same time as she had purchased the rest of what she called her Hans Hass kit —“it might be as well if I got out now.”

In the enjoyment of her swim she had forgotten Phlox Carmichael, and she was dried and dressed before she

remembered him again. It occurred to her that two things about him that morning were odd: he had returned to Wandles rather soon after his last visit and he was in the park of the Manor House alone; of Marigold there had been no sign.

She finished dressing and made a devious approach to the Stone. Phlox had gone. Laura thereupon took to the path again and, her damp towel rolled up and tucked under her arm, strode rapidly towards the wicket-gate to find Phlox leaning on it. He moved away and opened it for her.

"Well, well! Like myself you are up bright and early," he said. "From the mermaid dampness of your hair and the towel under your arm, I deduce that you have been bathing in the lake. A trifle cold, was it not?"

"Just at first, but you soon warm up," said Laura. "Are you staying at the vicarage again?"

"Well, yes. Rather sad for me, really. Marigold has had to go into hospital and our floating home is so lonely without her that I came down here last night in the hope that the good Pierces could find room for me for a bit."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Laura perfunctorily. "I hope your sister isn't seriously ill."

"I think not. I think not. I've been meaning to have that gang-plank of ours repaired these many moons. Now it must most certainly be done."

"Oh, it was an accident, then?"

"Unfortunately."

"What seems to be the damage?—to your sister, I mean."

"Shock, mostly, they seem to think. She is to be kept under observation for a week. She swallowed rather a lot of the river, too. I had quite a job to fish her out. There are only two or three feet of water between our boat and the bank, you see. But perhaps you would like to be trotting along? Your hair is extremely wet and you may take cold."

“How right you are,” said Laura. “So long, then. Be seeing you!” She retrieved her motor-scooter and rode away, thinking furiously, and got back to the Stone House in plenty of time for a bath before breakfast.

“The lake?” said Dame Beatrice later. “It is an innovation since I was last inside the house. The last owner had it made just before the financial disaster which compelled him to make over the property to the County authorities.”

“It’s in pretty good order,” said Laura. “Muddy round the edges, and as natural-seeming a pool as one could wish for. I suppose I was contravening a bye-law by swimming in it, but that couldn’t be helped. Incidentally, I was not the only occupant of the park this morning. Phlox Carmichael was there. He was lying stretched out on the Stone. I think it was some sort of religious gesture on his part, but what the actual religion was I’d be very hard put to it to say.”

“Where was his sister?” Dame Beatrice demanded.

“Oh, she’s in hospital. That’s why he’s down here again—according to him. That rotten gang-plank of theirs broke, it seems, and deposited Marigold in the somewhat murky Thames. It appears that he had quite a job to get her out, there being less than three feet of water between their boat and the shore.”

“Which hospital?”

“That did not transpire because I never thought to ask. Does it matter?”

“It matters a good deal if he tried to murder her.”

“You don’t really think that?” asked Laura, “He’s so fond of her, I understood.”

Dame Beatrice shrugged.

“There is not much of which our friend is incapable,” she said. “Robert had better get his policemen to go along to that house-boat. Further, I think that the red-herring of the Hamble River should be disregarded and that we should

concentrate our attention upon the environs of the Manor House."

"We could at least *look* at the Hamble River," Laura suggested. "There might be all sorts of possibilities."

"There speaks the yachtswoman. Very well. We will see whether there is any evidence there. Get me Robert on the telephone, please, when you have finished your breakfast."

The Hamble River was, as usual, crowded with boats. Even the optimistic Laura could not see how any information was to be gained there.

"It's hopeless," she said, surveying the crowded moorings. "I just wouldn't know where to start. What a pity! Oh, well, let's get back to Wandles. Why is it called Wandles, by the way?"

"I have devoted some small amount of time to research into the subject. I suppose the Stone of Sacrifice is some part of the answer. Do you believe in fairies?"

"Wandles? Wands? Strange goings-on round the Stone by the lee light of the moon? Possible, I suppose." The drive back to Wandles Parva was completed in silence. When they reached the Stone House, Laura suddenly asked:

"Why the Manor House again? Just because Phlox was haunting it in that peculiar fashion this morning?"

Dame Beatrice leered affectionately at her and suggested a visit to the Manor on the following afternoon.

"Why afternoon?" asked Dame Beatrice in the tone that Laura had used. "Because we shall not be likely to encounter Phlox Carmichael at that time. I have rung up the vicarage and told Veronica Pierce to see that the vicar and his guest do a little more work on their Roman road. With Phlox out of the way, we may be able to obtain valuable information without the embarrassment of being followed or overlooked."

"Good. That man always did give me the creeps and now that we suspect him of two murders and you hint at the possibility of a third, I feel I know why."

“Would you describe his posture on the Stone as ritualistic?”

“You put the word into my mouth, and that isn’t fair. It makes it a leading question.”

“But why not? You gave a very vivid description of him, and you said, if you remember . . .”

“Well, he did seem rather noticeable.”

“Do you think he was attempting to align the summer solstice?”

“Well, the Stone and those pine trees must mean something, mustn’t they?”

“Time, which settles all things, will settle that. Meanwhile, let us ring up our dear Robert again and see how the police are getting on.”

“Interested in your information about the accident to Marigold Carmichael,” said Gavin. “We went along to the house-boat to have a look round and I called on the very spiteful lady next door. The gang-plank is busted up all right, but it gives our experts the impression of having been damaged deliberately. The spiteful lady wasn’t helpful, as she wasn’t in residence when the accident occurred, and if anybody along the moorings knows anything, he or she is keeping very quiet about it. However, we’ve got a bit of a lead. We’ve found the doctor whom Phlox called in, and from him we’ve got the name of the hospital. I’m going along there now. I rang them up and they say Marigold is recovered sufficiently to answer a few questions, but that she’s had a bad shock and must be treated tenderly. I’ll come down to Wandles if there’s anything interesting to report, By the way, don’t either you or Laura go gallivanting about the neighbourhood alone. If your hunch is right, and the Manor House is the answer to one of our problems, Phlox may take fright and try to shut your mouths. If what we think about him is true, he’s a very ugly customer indeed and he’s got nothing to lose once he’s been rumbled.”

He rang off and went to the hospital attended by a shorthand writer, Police Sergeant Glimm. All was in readiness for them. Marigold was in a private room with a young nurse in attendance and looked more mouse-like than ever. She turned her head away when the officers came in and told the nurse, in a weak voice, that she could not be bothered with visitors. Both men were in plain clothes, but, although the hospital had been asked not to announce them as policemen but to leave Gavin to supply this information in the least disturbing manner possible, there seemed no doubt that she had guessed at once what they were.

"We just want a few details about your accident, Miss Carmichael," said Gavin kindly. "We shan't trouble you for long, and the nurse will be here all the time, you know. There's nothing to worry about. We must just know what happened, that's all."

"You're policemen."

"Quite true, but that need not alarm you, surely."

"I don't see why you've come. It was just an accident, as you said. There is nothing to tell you."

"Did you know that the gang-plank was unsafe?"

"It's been that way for months. It simply collapsed, that's all."

"Not quite all, I think. Who took an axe to it?"

"Phlox did."

"Oh, really? What was his idea?"

"He was angry and upset with it for letting me fall into the river. He revenged himself on it."

"Then how did he get back on to the house-boat after he had pulled you out of the water?"

"I don't know. I wasn't in a fit state to know anything."

"No, I don't suppose you were. Is your house-boat insured?"

"I suppose so. I know nothing about business matters."

"How many times has your brother been to see you in hospital?"

"He brought me here in a hired car. The doctor gave him a letter to admit me as a casualty."

"Have you been in this private room all the time?"

"Of course. I can easily afford it. We have lots of money, Phlox and I. How much do you want to go away and stop bothering me?"

Gavin nodded to the sergeant and they departed. Marigold had not once looked in their direction.

"Shielding this brother of hers?" asked the sergeant.

"It's as plain as the nose on my face," Gavin agreed, referring to a handsome feature which his wife had often derided, "but there simply isn't anything to go on. We've combed out those moorings, to the annoyance and inconvenience of one and all, and haven't got a thing. Still, now she's confessed that Carmichael took an axe to that gang-plank, I may be able to persuade somebody to talk. The next thing after that will be an interview with the gentleman himself, and this time I shan't handle him too tenderly."

Back in his office he rang Dame Beatrice again and said that he would be down on the following day but had not much news.

"Jolly good," said Laura heartlessly. "That means they're no further on than we are. What price the observation tower? I say, my thoughts suddenly run on strange lines!"

"Strangely enough, my own thoughts were running along those same lines, I fancy."

"You don't really think . . . Good Lord! That's quite an idea! 'Boot, saddle, to horse and away'—what?"

"A visit to the vicarage first, I rather fancy, to make certain that Phlox Carmichael is not likely to be at the Manor House to greet us."

They arrived at the vicarage to find that the vicar and Phlox were out, but that Veronica was at home and was dusting the drawing-room. She greeted them cordially.

"I was just going to have a cup of coffee," she said. "Do sit down. As I can see that you've come about something rather special, I can't wait to hear what it is."

"I understand that Mr. Carmichael is staying here again," said Dame Beatrice.

"Like his cheek, expecting me to look after him," said the vicar's wife. "But, of course, we're glad to have his money. I don't know why it is, but we always seem fairly quiet between now and the end of July—not that I ever encourage people to bring their brats here. Life is quite sufficiently complicated without having it cluttered up with children."

"You always have Hamish when I want to get rid of him," said Laura.

"Oh, Hamish! He's a cherub."

"Blimey!" said the mother of Hamish, with deep feeling. "Anyway, what about Phlox Carmichael?"

"He's thrown himself on our mercy. It appears that Marigold fell into the Thames and was nearly drowned."

"Probably not his fault she wasn't quite drowned," said Laura darkly. "What's he really here for?"

"He's lonely."

"Oh, yes?"

"Well, that's his story and it's very likely true. They're genuinely fond of one another, you know. I mean, he'd really hate anything to happen to Marigold."

"Yes, unless she threatened his safety. Marigold strikes me as the sort of person who could be persuaded to talk."

"Not against Phlox, believe me. They've stayed here several times now, and I should say that they're devoted to one another."

Laura glanced at Dame Beatrice, but her employer seemed unwilling to join in the conversation, so Laura,

having received no sign that she was to do the contrary, went on talking.

"I still don't see why Phlox should come down here," she said. "Which hospital is Marigold in?"

"I don't know. He didn't say. Does it matter?"

"No, not really, but I should have thought he'd want to be near her, if he's as fond of her as he pretends, that's all. It seems very odd to me that he should come away like this."

"Yes, there is that," Veronica admitted, "but men are peculiar in that way. Unless they're ill themselves, they seem to hate anything to do with sick people, and I don't suppose Phlox is any exception."

"I see that, of course, but there *are* such things as visiting days."

"Oh, dear!" said Veronica. "You somehow make it sound all wrong, and I'm sure it isn't. I don't like him, of course. I never have."

"A sound instinct, and I certainly don't think that burying himself down here while she's in hospital is anything to his credit. Still, it takes all kinds to make a world, I suppose. Where is he now?"

"He and Gascony have taken the car and gone to have another look—they've both seen it before—at the Roman villa at Chedworth. They'll be away all day. They took sandwiches and a thermos."

"Splendid," said Dame Beatrice. She finished her coffee, waited while Laura and Veronica drank a second cup, and then suggested that she should "be getting along," a suggestion with which Laura immediately agreed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Manor House

“Search while thou wilt, and let thy Reason go
To ransome Truth, even to th’ Abyss below.”

Ibid (Section 13)

THE original manor house had been built in the fifteenth century and had been burnt down early in the reign of King Henry VII. The family moved to another estate in Kent and did not rebuild at Wandles until the eighteenth century, when a nabob of the East India Company enriched himself at Calcutta, came home and purchased the land and the ruins from a distant cousin of the same surname, rebuilt the house, and lived in it. His son gambled away the fortune and killed himself, leaving no heir. Subsequently the widow sold up, but the new owner disliked the house, believing it to be haunted, and soon gave up living in it.

Neglected, the house fell into decay and when, during the late nineteenth century, the owner of the title deeds decided to live there, he also decided that the only thing to do was to pull down the fabric and rebuild. This he did, in a neo-Gothic style at once impressive and hideous. The eighteenth-century observation tower he retained. He had it shored up and made safe and it became a favourite place of his when he grew tired of the society of his wife and children.

Since the park and mansion had passed into the care of the County authority, the house and the observation tower had been locked up. Village boys had stoned the windows of the house and explored inside it, stripping off wall-paper and writing dirty words on the plaster, but the tower had slits for windows which admitted only just enough light to prevent the stairs, which led to the roof, from being a death-trap.

Dame Beatrice and Laura drove up to the locked front gates of the park and left the car there by the park-keeper's lodge. Then Laura shouted until the park-keeper's daughter came out to see what was wanted. The great ornamental gates remained closed.

"Dame Beatrice wants the key to the old tower. I suppose you've got it somewhere, Daisy, haven't you?" said Laura.

"The key? To the old tower? Why, that's a haunted tower, so they say."

"Very likely. Get me the key and I'll tell you whether it is, or not, when I get back."

"I don't like to lend it, not without our dad's leave, I don't."

"It's been lent before, I think," said Dame Beatrice.

"Only to vicar, mam."

"Then it can be lent to me."

"You'll have to take responsibility, then."

"Of course." So the girl disappeared inside the lodge and the visitors waited nearly five minutes before she came out again with a massive key.

"I'm not honestly sure it's the one," she said. "You'd have to try. You'll have to go round to the wicket-gate. These big gates is kept padlocked, I don't know for why."

"Keep an eye on the car," said Laura, handing over half a crown in exchange for the key. "I've no idea how long we shall be. Talking of which," she added to Dame Beatrice, as

they walked away, "I'm jolly glad I ate such an enormous lunch. It's nearly three o'clock."

"We shall be back in time for dinner, if not for tea."

It took them ten minutes to follow the park wall round to the wicket-gate but then they were soon among the trees and walking towards the Stone. They stopped (automatically, it seemed) to look at it.

"Ugly brute!" said Laura. "By the way, it was pretty significant, I thought, that the vicar once borrowed the key, because that means he borrowed it so that Phlox Carmichael could visit and climb the tower. You know, I can't help wondering how long the vicar had the key."

"An interesting thought. Your ideas are indeed attuned to mine."

They passed the lake in which Laura had bathed, and approached the Manor House. Dame Beatrice was making straight for the observation tower, but Laura said:

"Let's try the house first. I've never been inside, and it will be easy enough to get in, with all those broken windows. I'll reconnoitre, shall I? It might be best to try the back of the house. I'm not terribly anxious to cut myself on broken glass."

She stalked away, and Dame Beatrice lost sight of her round the corner of the building and stood in contemplation of the lake until she heard the sound of bolts being drawn. The front door opened and Laura said:

"Kitchen window was right out. Come on. Let's take a look-see."

There was nothing of particular interest, however. The house was extremely dirty, not only from an accumulation of dust and cobwebs, but also from the residue, sometimes disgusting, of human trespassers. A tramp had camped in the drawing-room at some time, the village boys appeared to have taken an active interest in the premises, too, and the general impression was, to say the least, unlovely.

They ascended the stairs, to find even more ruin, dirt, and desolation than in the downstairs rooms. There remained the conservatory, which led out of the drawing-room and which they had not explored.

“Lord!” exclaimed Laura, halting on the threshold. “Shades of Macbeth!”

The conservatory walls, which were mostly of glass but which had white wooden panelling to a height of three feet with white wooden shelves for potted plants, were splashed ominously with brownish stains. Dame Beatrice shook her head.

“I doubt it,” she said, “but we will help ourselves to a sample for analysis.” She took a penknife from her skirt pocket and delicately prised off a sliver of the panelling on which the stains were particularly well marked. “And now for the tower,” she said. She put her prize in a large envelope which she drew, carefully folded, from her skirt pocket (where it had lain inside the cover of a small, stiff-covered notebook), marked the envelope in the top corner with the date and the words *Manor Wandles Conservatory* and hid it under a layer of the bone-dry gravel which covered the conservatory shelves. “We can pick that up on our return,” she said. “Come along.”

Laura, carrying the key, led the way. It was about fifty yards from the house to the tower, by an overgrown path to the stables, and, from there, through a creaking, wide-swinging, battered and broken wooden door to a small shrubbery of neglected rhododendrons. Laura parted a way between two of the bushes and plunged through a wilderness of greater willow-herb to the foot of the tower.

“I will go first,” said Dame Beatrice, holding out a skinny claw for the key. Laura yielded it obediently and her employer inserted it in the lock. It turned with unexpected ease.

“Oiled!” exclaimed Laura. “We’re on the trail!”

Dame Beatrice did not reply. She pushed the door open and extracted the key, which she dropped into her pocket. She had brought a small electric torch, but found that it would not be needed. The very small windows were placed at frequent intervals up the outside wall of the tower and at some time, apparently fairly recently, had been rubbed over on the inside and gave sufficient light to the stair.

Laura counted the steps to the top, which was partly closed by an iron platform rather similar to the platform at the top of the look-out mast of a liner. Dame Beatrice avoided bumping her head, insinuated herself into the aperture, and climbed out into the open air. Laura followed and found herself in the sunshine once again, but, considerably less pleasingly, also in the presence of decay.

"Hilary Beads, I think," said Dame Beatrice, gazing with apparent unconcern at the unsavoury relict on the roof. "I'll stay here with her while you go and telephone the police."

"*Vice versa?*" asked Laura heroically. Her employer vigorously shook her head.

"I shall be happier alone here than you would be," she responded. Laura did not attempt to conceal her relief.

"Good-oh," she said, and lowered herself down the stair. Dame Beatrice, stepping past the corpse, went to the parapet and watched her secretary out of sight. Then she also went down the tower staircase, locked the door behind her, and strolled back to the house. Here she made a far more thorough and careful search than she had allowed herself to do while Laura was with her, and presently she found a door which, opening on to a flight of stone steps, led down to the cellar.

Here her torch was necessary. She switched it on, descended the steps, and began to explore. It was a commodious cellar and ran under four rooms so that it formed a kind of suite, one space opening out of another by means of an archway the width of a fairly wide door.

In the floor of the third vault she visited there was a hinged trap-door. She pulled it up with considerable effort and it fell back with a crash which echoed from the low ceiling of the cellar with noise enough to suggest that the house was falling down. Another stairway was disclosed, this time in the form of a broad-treaded wooden ladder which led down to a wine-cellar of later construction than that of the cellars above.

Evidence of its purpose lay about in the form of bins full of empty wine bottles and a tumbled group of brandy, whisky, and gin bottles in a cobwebbed corner. Dame Beatrice searched the floor diligently, lighting each separate flagstone with her torch until she discovered what she was looking for—a biggish, clean patch in one corner. It was not proof positive, but she felt justified in regarding it as proof presumptive, of the place where the body had lain before the murderer moved it and came back to wash the blood-stains from the floor.

She attempted to reconstruct what had happened. No woman of Hilary Beads' experience would have permitted herself to be decoyed to such a place as this wine-cellar. That could be written off as a certainty. Nevertheless, the probability was that she had been murdered somewhere in the vicinity of the Manor House because the body had had to be transported to the top of the tower and it was reasonable to suppose that the murderer would have given himself as little trouble as possible.

The obvious place of sacrifice, Dame Beatrice reflected, was the toad-like Stone. She climbed up the cellar stairs and then, at the foot of the stone steps which led to the kitchen wing, she paused. Somebody else was in the Manor House. She remained where she was, and listened. The footsteps which had attracted her attention sounded loud and distinct, a confident masculine tread, she thought. Whoever it was, he was alone. What was more, he seemed to be searching for something, for, besides the footsteps, she heard doors

being wrenched open and flung to, as though the seeker had no time to spare.

At last, having apparently exhausted the ground-floor rooms and cupboards, the man ascended the stairs. Dame Beatrice crept out of the cellar as quietly as a cat, listened at the top of the stairs in order to determine whether the unknown caller at the Manor was in the front of the house or at the back, placed him very easily because of the noise he was making, and so left the premises by the kitchen door and was soon on her way to the tower.

She locked the door behind her before she mounted to the top, for she suspected that the visitor to the house was Phlox Carmichael, returned from his excursion with the vicar, and she had no mind to let him find her alone and unarmed upon the probable scene of his crime.

From the top of the tower, in company with the corpse, she watched and waited, but the person who emerged eventually from the Manor House was not Phlox Carmichael, but Mr. Colson from the Pelican House Academy. He did not so much as glance toward the tower, but made his way with great, purposeful strides around the eastern side of the lake and up to the Stone of Sacrifice. Here he stayed, studying the Stone intently, the sunshine flashing with dazzling light from the magnifying-glass in his hand.

He crawled all over the Stone, missing not an inch of its surface, and every now and then he glanced about him as though he feared that his activities might be witnessed. He was not disturbed, however, and, his close inspection of the Stone completed, he hurried away and was lost to sight among the trees. Ten minutes later Laura arrived. She was unaccompanied. Dame Beatrice descended and unlocked the door of the tower.

"You should have waited for the police," she said.

"They're on their way," said Laura. "I didn't bother with the village bobby. I telephoned Culminster. They'll be here

directly. I didn't want to hang about, knowing I'd left you here with *It*. Are we going aloft again?"

"It scarcely seems worth while. I do not suppose the body will be spirited away. Did you explain on the telephone where it was to be found?"

"Yes, but I don't know whether they understood, so I emphasised the Manor House and told them that anybody in the village would direct them. It won't take them any time to get here from Culminster in a fast car. I suppose they'll go to the front gates. Wonder whether Daisy will open up, or whether she'll chivvy them round to the wicket-gate?"

"I should not be in the least surprised to find that the lock on the front gates is too rusty to be opened. By the way, the Manor House has had another visitor since you left here."

As they stood in the open doorway of the tower, Dame Beatrice gave Laura an account of Colson's activities.

"But what on earth could he have been looking for?" Laura enquired. "There was nothing interesting except the bloodstains in the conservatory. And you don't think they *are* bloodstains, anyway."

"When the police have gone, I intend to look round in the house again, child. What Mr. Colson expected to find I have no idea, but I am reasonably sure of two things: one, that he did not find it and, two, that it is still there to be found. Oh, and there was a suspiciously clean patch on the floor of the wine-cellar. I wondered whether the body had lain there before it was carried here."

"Here!" said Laura suddenly. "Inside, quick, and turn the key!"

Dame Beatrice obeyed with celerity. She, too, had heard the sound of whistling, hardly an indication of the advent of the police. Laura raced up the staircase first, ducked her head round the edge of the platform and crawled out upon the flat roof. Dame Beatrice followed and they peered cautiously over the parapet. This time Dame Beatrice was

not disappointed. From the trees emerged Phlox Carmichael. He paused at the Stone and then, to the great interest of the watchers on top of the tower, he prostrated himself upon it.

"Just as he did before," muttered Laura. "What's the idea, I wonder? Is he insane?"

"He certainly seems remarkably superstitious," said Dame Beatrice. Phlox stood up again after he had performed his strange ritual and walked slowly towards the tower.

"I suppose he's got a key," muttered Laura. "Stand by to receive cavalry. Wish I'd got a good heavy spanner with me." She crawled across to the opening and waited to hear Phlox putting his key in the lock. Dame Beatrice remained on watch and, after a minute or two, while Laura limbered up a well-shod foot with the purpose of stamping on the intruder's fingers as soon as these appeared in the opening, she announced:

"The police are here and Mr. Carmichael is gazing at his reflection in the lake. He looks a monument of contemplative rectitude. I had better go down and let the Superintendent in."

She did this, and conducted him and his sergeant up the stairs. The two men looked at the body.

"Doctor and photographer will be along in just a minute," said the Superintendent. "Nothing you can tell us about deceased, I suppose, mam?"

"I recognise her as the missing woman you have been trying to trace. She is Miss Hilary Beads."

"We'd better get a relative to swear to her, although I'm certain you're right, mam. There's the aunt in Bournemouth you put us in touch with. She's probably more reliable than the mother who went up north before. She won't relish the job, I don't suppose, but we'll make it as easy for her as we can. Well, no need to keep you here any longer. Perhaps you'll let me have a statement later on at your house."

“Certainly, Superintendent.” She and Laura left the tower just as the doctor and the photographer arrived. Phlox Carmichael had disappeared.

“May be keeping an eye on things from some hide-out or other,” said Laura. “If so, he’ll guess we’ve sicked the police on to his little game. Better keep an eye skinned for him. He’s a very nasty type and might think that revenge is sweet,”

“He would be very foolish to attempt to revenge himself on us. He is in quite enough trouble as it is. There are several things he has to explain. By the way, I shall be glad to learn the verdict of the British Museum experts upon those finds from Dickon’s smallholding.”

“You’re hoping they’re fakes, of course. That might mean that Phlox Carmichael planted them.”

“Why should he do such a thing?”

“To get the ground well dug over—he’d guess that tons of people would want to come and have a go, once the things had been found—and then, when nothing else *was* found, he buried the skeleton there, thinking that nobody would bother to dig there any longer.”

“It is a *possible* hypothesis,” said Dame Beatrice. “My own theory is that the idea of burying the cadaver in that particular spot came to Phlox with the suddenness of a Minerva springing, fully armed, from Jupiter’s head. I think it came to him as a result of that chance meeting with Hilary Beads here in the village and the further chance meeting with the boys of Pelican House. He saw what he thought was a very good opportunity of getting rid of the skeleton so that, if it did get dug up, later on, the conclusion would be that it was, in fact, Roman.”

“A conclusion which you knocked on the head. I wonder what Phlox feels like now?”

By this time they were leaving the lake behind them and were in full sight of the Stone. This time, squat, enormous, and baleful, it was untenanted except for a fat,

lethargic wood-pigeon which scarcely bothered to fly off at their approach. There was no sign of Phlox Carmichael anywhere in the wood into which the path plunged, although Laura, leading the way, kept as sharp a look-out as though she were pioneering in the territory of hostile tribes.

They picked up the car at the lodge and Laura asked, in an off-hand way, whether anybody else had called there that afternoon. Daisy was voluble on the subject. First the gentleman as stayed with vicar had been to her for a key to the house and Daisy had had to tell him as there was not no such thing unless he cared to ask the County Council about one. Then he had demanded the key to the tower and she had had to tell him as another party had got it already but no doubt they would not have no objection to letting him up if he hollered. He had been up before, with vicar, so he knowed his way all right.

“Did you tell him who we were?” asked Laura. Daisy had not told him that, it being no blessed business of his who had tooke the key so be as they made no objection to having him along of them. Then there had been the police; not as Daisy would have known they was police excepting as they had it on their car. Two lots, there was. Surely Mrs. Gavin and Dame Beatrice had seen them. Wanted Daisy to let them in by the big gates, they had, but Daisy had been obliged to inform them that not elephants, no, nor rhinoceroses could not shift them gates a single inch without the keys, and them she had not got. She could not help wondering what their business was. She could only suppose that there had been complaints about the way them boys had mucked up the Manor House and were hoping to catch some of them at it, but, if that was the case, why was one of them the police doctor?

“How did you know it was the police doctor?” Laura demanded. “It wasn’t our own Doctor Stall, was it?”

Daisy had known he was the police doctor because she had been called as a witness once at Culminster when John

Marshall had been run over by his own tractor and killed, and the police doctor had given evidence at the inquest. She would know him again anywhere. She glanced sharply at Laura and then said pointedly:

"You went off in the car here to fetch them, I suppose, Mrs. Gavin?"

"To telephone, actually," said Laura. She did not volunteer any further information, but got into the driver's seat. Dame Beatrice said:

"When the vicar borrowed the key to show Mr. Carmichael the tower, did you get it back the same day?"

Daisy did not hesitate.

"No, that we didn't," she replied. "Best part of a week that key was gone. The gentleman said as he'd mislaid it. Mrs. Pierce found it in his bedroom after he'd gone off home."

"So Phlox had a key cut, and could get into the tower when he liked," remarked Laura, as they drove home. "But I'd still like to know what Colson was doing."

This problem was solved by Mr. Colson himself in a telephone message to the police, as Laura heard a little later on.

"Blood—fairly fresh—on the stone of sacrifice?" she said. "But it was obvious that's where Hilary Beads was murdered. Why else should Phlox have prostrated himself on it like that?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dark Suspicions

“For our endeavours are not only to combat with doubts, but always to dispute with the Devil.”

Ibid (Section 19)

DAME BEATRICE and Laura had been at home for the better part of two hours when the Superintendent called. He asked to interview them separately, so Laura took herself off into the garden where she sat in a deck chair by the side of a grass tennis court while Dame Beatrice, in the library, was interrogated politely but ruthlessly.

“What caused you to go to the Manor House today, mam?”

“I believed that there would be a dead body on top of the tower.”

“What gave you such an impression?”

“It was not an impression. Ever since she disappeared I have felt certain that Miss Hilary Beads was dead, and I have spent some time in working out where the body could have been concealed. It seemed to me that the tower was the place.”

“We’re interested, mam, in your reactions. We know your reputation, of course, and I’m bound to say we’re proud to have you on our side of the fence. Now, mam, if you would just . . .”

“Come clean, you mean,” said Dame Beatrice, recollecting a cliché she had heard Laura use in past times. “Very well, Superintendent, I will. We shall begin with the body found on Dickon’s smallholding. I held the view—and it proves to have been the correct one—that the body was that of a comparatively recently murdered person.”

“We still haven’t established the identity of that person, mam.”

“I agree that we have not, but you have been working in collaboration with Detective Chief-Inspector Robert Gavin and his views coincide with mine.”

“Yes, mam, I agree with both of you, but until we find some means of identifying that skeleton, we’ve no proof. We can hardly expect Mr. Carmichael to confess he murdered his wife, and there’s nothing to go on there. We’ve been working the dentists in the Chelsea area and also around Reading and Oxford. The skeleton was so short of teeth that there must be a record of a denture or dentures somewhere. Trouble seems to be a change of name. Nobody recognises the name Carmichael or, if they do, it turns out to be the most innocent and law-abiding parties—people you couldn’t possibly suspect.”

“I am convinced, Superintendent, that the evidence we require exists.”

“Oh, we shan’t give up, mam.”

“Of course you won’t. Well, now: this skeleton was dug up on Dickon’s smallholding by the vicar of Wandles, the Reverend Gascony Pierce, assisted by his paying guests Phlox and Marigold Carmichael, who turn out to be—not husband and wife, as most people supposed—but brother and sister. Now I cannot help feeling, Superintendent, that the two deaths you are investigating and the death of the Thames boatman are connected.”

“The brother and sister relationship may be a fact, but it’s a fact that doesn’t seem to hinge on any other facts, mam. That’s the trouble. From what I’ve been told, Mr. Phlox

Carmichael didn't attempt to deny that Miss Marigold was his sister. He didn't try to bluff it out in any sense. Just admitted it with a 'so what,' as I understand it. Doesn't sound much like a guilty conscience to me."

"But I don't think Mr. Carmichael has a guilty conscience, you know, Superintendent. From my reading of his character, I am of the opinion that whatever Mr. Carmichael has done he can account for in his own way. He will have justified himself fully in his own mind, whether he has committed murder or not. His is a strange but undivided character. I am interested in him. He does not lack ideals."

The Superintendent stared at her suspiciously and did not reply for a moment. Then he said:

"So this Mr. Phlox Carmichael doesn't know right from wrong. Is that your contention, mam?"

"Not exactly. He takes the responsibility of creating his own conception of what is right. That is not quite what you meant, I think."

"I don't pretend to understand you, mam. Are you prepared to explain?"

"Well, as I said before, the whole case turns upon the question of whether Phlox Carmichael has been married at some time and whether his wife's skeleton was found on Dickon's smallholding."

"Even if he has been married at some time, and even if that skeleton is the remains of his wife, I don't see that it gets us any further until we can prove it. Anything more, Dame Beatrice?"

"I think that Mrs. Carmichael was in somebody's way and that the marriage was spoiling somebody's life. The conclusion to which I have come is that this person is not (as I first supposed) Phlox himself, but his sister Marigold."

"You mean *she* killed the wife? I'd never have thought of such a thing!"

"Neither did I until Miss Hilary Beads disappeared."

"But you don't think she killed Miss Beads as well, do you?"

"I suggest that Phlox did that. I also suggest that he killed the old boatman, Jack Plinlimmon. Both murders were committed to save his sister from the consequences of her crime."

"I know Mr. Gavin has been working on the theory that the Carmichaels knew Miss Beads in London and that she knew something to their disadvantage. If you're right, there's a tie-up there all right. I begin to see what you mean about Mr. Carmichael."

"His whole attitude towards his sister is that of a benevolent despot, with the emphasis on the word "benevolent." He has constituted himself her mentor and her protector."

"Wouldn't you expect him to have resented the murder of his wife, mam?"

"I doubt whether he has ever felt resentment—certainly not since his childhood, I should say. His is a deeply philosophical nature. I am sure he felt no resentment towards Miss Beads, although, to the best of my belief, she was attempting to blackmail him and his sister. He removed her and Plinlimmon as he would have removed two harmful snakes and with just as much lack of emotion. He saw them both as dangerous obstacles to his sister's safety and happiness, and that was that. Such is my theory."

"May I ask whether Mr. Gavin is aware of this theory, mam?"

"As I have formulated it so very recently, I have not had an opportunity of passing it on."

"I should like to discuss it with him, mam."

"You are welcome to do so. Is he still in London?"

"Working on the Plinlimmon end, but I don't know that he's got much further with it."

"Yes, the problem of the murder of Plinlimmon is more likely of a solution which can be subjected to proof than

either of the other two deaths. You might care, however, to effect a search of the Manor House cellars, including the wine cellar. It seemed to me, when I inspected them, that a body might have been removed and part of the floor cleaned."

"My men are there at the moment, mam, and I shall be getting along there myself as soon as I've had a talk with Mrs. Gavin."

Dame Beatrice went into the garden and Laura came into the library. She seated herself, and the Superintendent, who had been standing, took a chair and drew it up to the table. He laid a notebook and a fountain pen in front of him.

"Golly!" said Laura. "That looks horribly official."

"I might need to make a note or two," said the Superintendent, somewhat apologetically. "Dame Beatrice has just put forward a theory which you might be able to enlarge on for me."

"I don't know anything that she doesn't."

"No, no, Mrs. Gavin, I don't suppose you do. 'Enlarge' was what I said, and what I meant. Now, the latest theory put forward by Dame Beatrice is that Miss Marigold Carmichael killed Mr. Phlox's wife in a fit of jealousy or some such. What's your opinion about that?"

"I don't see that it matters, from our point of view, which of them killed his wife. What we've to prove first is that it *was* his wife whose skeleton was buried in that smallholding. One thing which Dame B. has shown to be possible, if not right down probable, is that a body can be exposed to the air on top of that observation tower for almost any length of time without being spotted. According to what I understand, in less than two years such an exposed corpse would be reduced to a skeleton."

"I'm no medico. Is that Dame Beatrice's opinion?"

"Backed up by other authorities. This being the case, it seems to me that it would have been the simplest thing for Phlox Carmichael to have carted the skeleton from the tower

and buried it in the smallholding at some time during the period Wednesday, May 22nd, to Saturday, May 25th."

"Quite feasible. But why should he have moved it?"

"Well, it seems that he planned to reduce Hilary Beads' body to a skeleton, too, by leaving it exposed in the same place in the same way. Where he proposed to put it after that is anybody's guess. I'd like to know what his reactions were, though, when the vicar decided to re-dig on Dickon's small-holding. I bet he'd thought that particular bit of ground was not due to be touched again for months and months. He knew that the kids from Pelican House and the girls from the convent school had had a tremendous go at it, and had found nothing. He must have had a fearful jolt when the vicar took him there again."

"By dint of making no protest about where the vicar proposed to dig, and by keeping his trap shut subsequently, he's foxed us all right, though, Mrs. Gavin. We really haven't a shred of evidence against him or his sister, not a shred."

"Sweet Thames will have to run softly and catchee monkey that way," said Laura.

"You've put your finger right on the spot, Mrs. Gavin. Let's hope the Detective Chief-Inspector will soon have something for us. Now, is there anything else you can suggest?"

"I'd still like to know the Carmichaels' real name. We drew a complete blank in Chelsea over that."

"Not a *complete* blank, Mrs. Gavin, otherwise I reckon that old chap Plinlimmon would still be alive."

"Another thing I'd like to know is how Phlox found out that we were snooping around Chelsea."

"I should be inclined to say Plinlimmon tipped him off that enquiries were being made in the Chelsea area. Then Phlox got suspicious that Plinlimmon was bribable, and had better be put where he could do the Carmichaels no harm."

"Couldn't the police trace the call?"

"They can have a good try. That's if he used the telephone, of course. He may have dropped a card."

"The interval between our chasing round Chelsea and Fulham and Plinlimmon's death in the river was too short for that. What about a telegram?"

"Old chaps with Plinlimmon's education and background only send telegrams to announce serious illness in the family. He wouldn't have thought of telegraphing a casual thing like a police snoop. Of course, we shall find out whether he *did*, by any chance, think his news important enough for a telegram—but I know the answer all right. That brings us back to a phone call, and as it would have been a call he couldn't dial, it means he'd have had to talk to the operator. Something might come of that."

"Any good asking the vicar about any calls for Phlox at about that time?—oh, no, he'd have been back on his boat then. And that's another thing: he didn't usually pay two visits to the vicarage with such a short interval in between. Any good having a chat with Mr. Pierce about that? Phlox is there again, you see."

"I think you've got something there, Mrs. Gavin. It's a suspicious circumstance, and any suspicious circumstance (in this case, in particular) ought to be looked into. I'm much obliged for the tip. Well, if there's nothing else, I might as well get back to the Manor House to see whether my chaps have found anything, and to have a look at a clean patch I hear Dame Beatrice found on the floor of the wine-cellar. After that, I'll tackle the vicarage."

"I don't suppose a clean patch on the cellar floor will get you anywhere," said Laura. "You couldn't prove anything from it."

"I'd like to see it, all the same. Have you seen it yourself?"

"No, I haven't. Dame Beatrice snooped around while I'd gone to telephone to you."

The Superintendent took himself off to the Manor House and Laura rejoined Dame Beatrice. She informed her that the Superintendent proposed to visit the vicarage and of what Laura's own suggestions had been.

"Yes, it does seem slightly odd that Phlox should have returned to the vicarage and left his sister in hospital. I don't know what the Superintendent will get out of him about it, though," said Dame Beatrice.

"His name ought to be Fox, not Phlox," said Laura. "He's as cunning as he can be. I don't believe we're ever going to prove anything against either him or Marigold."

"Where the wife's death is concerned, it may be difficult, but I really think we shall unearth some evidence in connection with the deaths of Plinlimmon and Hilary Beads, you know. We shall be bound to hit upon somebody who has seen something suspicious. There is always the handbag."

"Gavin will certainly ferret out the river business," said Robert Gavin's wife. "Oh, yes, I'm sure you're right."

"I am going to get hold of Marigold Carmichael again," said Dame Beatrice. "I think I will do it before the Superintendent gets to the hospital and frightens her."

"I can't help wondering whether a good fright wouldn't get more results than the kid-glove stuff we've been handing out so far," said Laura bluntly. "She's obviously the weaker vessel and might be scared into talking."

"A frightened witness is apt to lie. In any case, whatever line the Carmichaels may choose to follow, open confession is hardly likely to be one of them. If only we could discover the Carmichaels' real name, the proof of their guilt would be easy enough to establish."

"You mean, we could soon find out what the connection was between them and Hilary Beads?"

"That, among other things. I'll go to the vicarage and pump Mrs. Pierce again."

"Is there anything you want me to do while you're gone?"

“Nothing.”

“Then I think I’ll push along to the Manor House and obstruct the police. Nothing like taking advantage of having dwindled into becoming the wife of Robert Gavin.”

They walked together as far as the vicarage and then Laura, who had no great hope of finding entertainment at the Manor House and who, therefore, did not feel pressed for time, struck out for her destination by a path across the edge of the New Forest. Dame Beatrice walked across the vicarage lawn to the open french windows and tapped politely on them. She had already spotted that Marigold Carmichael must have been discharged from hospital, for she was back at the vicarage and, at this moment, the sole occupant of the room.

“Oh, dear!” said Marigold, coming forward at once. “I’m so sorry, but everyone else seems to be out. Phlox has gone off with Mr. Pierce to see the nuns’ church at Romsey, and Mrs. Pierce is in the village with the Women’s Institute. Can I possibly be of help?”

“Well, you might be,” said Dame Beatrice, entering the room. “I am sure you can answer one question at any rate. Does your brother still suffer from hallucinations?”

“I think you cured him. He never complains now. He has such *happy* dreams.”

“It would be most unfortunate for him if disclosures were made which interrupted those, would it not?”

“Disclosures? I don’t know what you mean.”

“Are you aware that I have discovered the dead body of Miss Hilary Beads and that the police are now investigating the cause of her death?”

“Really?” said Marigold, with widening eyes. “Of course, I didn’t know her, but I have heard the Pierces speak of her. What a dreadful shock for them!”

“You may not have known her well, but you and your brother have met her.”

Marigold shook her head violently.

"Never!"

"To my certain knowledge you met her in this very village."

"You can't prove that! You can't!"

"Dear me!" said Dame Beatrice, regarding her with interest and mild astonishment. "You seem to have become extremely heated over what would seem a trivial remark of mine."

"You say she is dead, and that the police are at the Manor House, and then you accuse Phlox and me of knowing something about it, and then you call that a trivial remark!"

"I said that you had met her."

"But the police! The police! We have never been mixed up with the police before we came here! First that horrid skeleton—as though *we* wanted it dug up and all that fuss made!—and now this other—this Beads woman! It's terrible!"

"I am afraid you will have to face more police questioning, however terrible you may think it."

"So will you," said Marigold, nastily, "as it was you who discovered Miss Beads' body!"

"I face the prospect with equanimity. What were you going to say before you changed your sentence?"

Marigold looked at her suspiciously.

"What sentence?" she asked.

"You said, 'and now this other—this Beads woman! It's terrible.' Did you not say that?"

"I don't remember. I don't see that it matters, anyway. You are trying to trip me up."

"I *have* tripped you up."

"No, you haven't, and I shan't answer any more questions. You can ask Phlox anything else you want to know. He'll make mincemeat of you."

"Dear me!" said Dame Beatrice. "I sincerely hope not! What a bloodthirsty person he must be!"

With this Parthian shot, she turned and left by the way she had come in. When she reached the vicarage gate she met Veronica Pierce.

"Hullo," said the vicar's wife, "what are *you* doing here? I'm so sorry I was out. Are you too busy to come in again for ten minutes?"

"I am not too busy, but I must ask you to excuse me. I have been endeavouring to frighten Marigold Carmichael and I have left her both frightened and angry."

"Oh, dear! Well, if you feel it would be more tactful not to encounter her again so soon, I'll say good-bye until next time."

She passed on and Dame Beatrice glanced back. Marigold was standing in the open french window, leaning against the left-hand side of the door-frame with her right arm curved theatrically across her eyes. Dame Beatrice faced about and returned to the french windows. As Veronica Pierce reached these, Marigold abandoned the pose only to produce another histrionic gesture.

"Ah, you! You, my saviour!" she exclaimed, and cast her arms around Veronica, who staggered back under the impact. Dame Beatrice, who could move deceptively quickly, caught up with her as she recovered her balance.

"I *would* like to have another word with Miss Carmichael, if I may," she said, contradicting this mild and polite statement by stepping with alacrity past the speechless Marigold. "I quite forgot to ask her how far she felt she had recovered from her accident. Do tell me, Miss Carmichael, how it happened. We have nothing to go on except for the laconic statements over the telephone of Detective Chief-Inspector Robert Gavin of the C.I.D."

"The C.I.D.?" repeated Marigold, turning in the doorway and regarding her tormentor with wide and frightened eyes. "What has it to do with *them*?"

"They investigate that sort of thing, I suppose," said Veronica, who had come into the room.

"*What* sort of thing?" demanded the ex-invalid.

"Miss Carmichael," said Dame Beatrice, with unwonted severity, "do not attempt dissimulation. Robert Gavin visited you while you were in hospital."

"But I *satisfied* him!" screamed Marigold. "I did not expect him to carry the matter any further! I don't see *why* he's interested!"

"One knows little of what goes on in the minds of Scotland Yard officials," said Dame Beatrice. "Do tell me, in your own words, exactly what happened when you fell into the Thames. Mrs. Gavin had a swim recently, although not on the same day," she added, with apparent inconsequence. Marigold seized upon this statement in an obvious attempt to change the subject.

"Mrs. Gavin? Did *she* fall into the water?"

"By her own voluntary act. She took a swim in that lake in the grounds of the Manor House."

"The Manor House? Where is that?"

"Oh, come, Marigold!" protested Veronica Pierce. "You know perfectly well where it is! Don't you remember that Gascony took Phlox to visit the Stone of Sacrifice in the grounds there? It would have been on your first visit. Perhaps, though, you've forgotten," she concluded kindly.

"Oh, there?" said Marigold. "Yes, I remember now that Phlox did say something about it. But what has it got to do with me and my accident?"

"I was wondering where your brother was when you fell into the Thames," said Dame Beatrice.

"On our house-boat, of course. Where should he have been?"

"On your house-boat. Was he near you when the gang-plank broke?"

"No, he was in the galley melting glue."

"Glue?"

"Yes, for mending the gang-plank. I said it wasn't necessary, because I loathe the smell of glue, and I stamped

on the gang-plank to show him it was quite safe, but, of course, it wasn't, and I fell in."

"I see," said Dame Beatrice. "By the way, Mrs. Gavin saw your brother in the Manor grounds on the morning when she bathed in the lake. He was lying on the Stone of Sacrifice in a ritualistic attitude and did not notice her."

"Phlox does the loveliest, most unexpected things," said Marigold.

"Such as saving your neck?" asked Dame Beatrice, with unwonted venom.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Thames-side Gleanings

“This cryptick and involved method . . .”

Ibid (Section 17)

DETECTIVE CHIEF-INSPECTOR ROBERT GAVIN, the river police, and his own men had been conducting one of those mammoth enquiries so well known to Scotland Yard and so boring in retrospect, all along the river from Chelsea to Chiswick Eyot.

Every master of craft, boat-owner, wage-hand, lighter-man, longshoreman, bargee, rowing boat lessor, riverside-pub landlord, Thames Conservancy workman, and anyone else who, by any conceivable flight of imagination, might be supposed to have noted the last cruise of the drowned Plinlimmon, was pinned down and questioned and the meagre scraps of information collated.

At the very moment when Dame Beatrice re-entered the Stone House to await the arrival of Laura from the Manor, Gavin, in his office in New Scotland Yard, was saying to an inspector of River Police:

“Now, then, what have we got? He was seen by your chap Ferris near Hammersmith Bridge, and appeared to be alone on the boat. As the boat was a cabin cruiser, that needn’t mean that he *was* actually alone. Same story from that fellow whose tug passed him at Barnes. Others confirm, but are a bit vague as to description.”

"In fact, having knocked him on the head and chucked him overboard . . ."

"No, no! We've been barking up the wrong tree," said Gavin, interrupting. "We started from the wrong end."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean we ought to have started from the Oxford end. Don't you see? Whether he was killed on his own boat or on Carmichael's house-boat the body was dumped somewhere off Brentford or Chiswick from *another* boat. Look here, I'll go up to Oxford and see whether I can't trace his boat somewhere in the upper reaches, and I'll get my sergeant to go and have a look-see around and on board that house-boat. Hope they've installed a new gang-plank by this time! And that reminds me that I've still got to talk to Carmichael about Marigold's ducking when I get time. Now, what else have we got? Nothing that's of any use, I'll wager."

Gavin went to Oxford by car on the following morning very early. He treated himself to breakfast at the *Randolph* and then chartered a small launch and set out on his tour. It was holiday weather and he felt extremely light-hearted as his craft chugged gently past the college barges and the Long Bridges with their bathing pools. There followed the newish concrete footbridge dominated by its ugly, tall railings, and very soon Iffley came into view.

It was unlikely that an abandoned cruiser, if it had been seen so near Oxford and on so frequented a part of the river, would not have been reported, so he continued as far as Sandford before he tied up and questioned the lock-keeper. The man was certain that no motor cruiser answering the detailed description which Gavin, having actually seen it at Chelsea, was able to give of Plinlimmon's boat, had passed his lock, so Gavin continued his trip and stopped again at Abingdon, with the same negative result.

He was not disappointed, for he had made up his mind that Plinlimmon's boat, if it had been abandoned, would be found in a backwater, and not on the main stream.

However, he drew in and questioned a couple of shirt-sleeved youths who were fishing from the bank, and, moved by one of those mysterious flashes of insight which had brought him to his present position at a remarkably early age, he described not the boat but Phlox Carmichael.

"Yes, he was up here with an old chap a week or so back," said one of the boys at once. "A tall, scraggy, cissy-looking chap in a straw hat and sandals. The old chap looked like a fisherman or an old sailor or something. Gave me two bob for showing 'em how to get to the Abbey."

"Did you notice their boat?"

"Not to know it was theirs."

"What time of day was this?"

"About a quarter after twelve. I knocked off at twelve and met them on the bridge on the way home to my dinner."

"Oh, I see." Gavin was a little disappointed. "You didn't actually see them come off a boat?"

"No, sir."

"You left them after you had directed them to the Abbey?"

"Yes, and never saw them again."

They had been seen together at Abingdon, though, thought Gavin. That was something. Abingdon was the farthest point upstream which they had visited. That seemed more than likely. He backed his launch out from the bank and, feeling cheerful, headed gently downstream past Andersay Island for the wide, mile-long stretch of Culham Reach.

Here the necessity of avoiding and giving way to sailing dinghies took his attention from the true reason of his being there, and he thoroughly enjoyed himself. At Sutton Courtenay he stopped again, feeling sure that the *dilettante* Phlox would have shaken off the thoughts of murder in order to have a mind free to enjoy and appreciate the beautiful old Berkshire village.

He was out of luck here. Nobody remembered the strangers. Possibly Phlox had thought Dorchester better worth seeing, or, equally possibly, Gavin had not hit upon the right people to question. Certainly the woman dusting pews in the church had not been there at the time of Phlox's visit, if he *had* visited it. Gavin chugged gravely and enjoyably on, past Clifton lock and Day's lock and so to Dorchester.

He had had a fairly late breakfast, but he stayed in Dorchester for lunch, although not until he had visited the Abbey church for news of his suspect. There was none to be had. The church was completely deserted. He spent half an hour there, admiring the eleventh-century porch which masked the doorway by which he entered the chancel with its fine fresco on the east wall, the Norman font of lead with its eleven apostles and its Greek Orthodox effect, and the Jesse window in the north wall. He studied the effigies and the monuments and the tender inscription to Mrs. Sarah Fletcher who had died at the age of twenty-nine on the seventh of June, 1799 and was, it seemed, of "artless beauty, innocence of mind and gentle manners" and by these gifts and qualities had obtained "the love and esteem of all who knew her."

Gavin found his thoughts turning to Marigold Carmichael, who was certainly not possessed of beauty, artless or otherwise, but who, otherwise, appeared to fit the description. He would have been extremely surprised if he could have read the mind of Dame Beatrice and so learned *her* opinion of Phlox's sister. As it was, he was spared the shock of this discovery until later and, failing to make any useful contacts in the great church, he took himself off for his lunch. An enquiry of the waitress again evoked no useful response.

After lunch, on he went, past Little Wittenham, the Sinodun hills with their landmarks of beeches known as the Wittenham Clumps, and then he decided to explore the

River Thame, which hereabouts joins the parent stream. His launch was of very shallow draught and he took it cautiously but with confidence, towards the Vale of Aylesbury.

There was nothing, and, coming to water which, he felt, would hardly have taken a Thames motor cruiser as old as Plinlimmon's boat, he turned back again and had tea at the *Shillingford Bridge Hotel*, from where he telephoned his wife, telling her that, unless something unforeseen or of dramatic interest turned up, he would be spending the night at Benson.

"You lucky thing!" said Laura enviously. "Fancy being *paid* to cruise all by yourself on the Thames! Do you expect to find Plinlimmon's boat?"

"Oh, yes. It must be somewhere."

"It's probably sunk."

"I'd thought of that, but they're not such easy things to sink, you know."

"Oh, well, good hunting!"

"Nice to be some people," said Gavin.

"You're telling *me*!" said Laura. She turned to Dame Beatrice. "What good will it do if they find Plinlimmon's boat?" she demanded. Gavin, after a good, substantial dinner at an ancient coaching inn at Benson, was beginning to ask himself the same question. Unless Plinlimmon had been killed on board his own craft, there seemed little point in tracing the missing cruiser.

He slept well and woke up in a different frame of mind and with a new idea. He had been dreaming of Edgar Allen Poe and the missing letter and so, immediately after breakfast, he telephoned the hirers and told them where to collect their launch. Then he hired a car and was driven to Maidenhead.

Meanwhile his sergeant, accompanied by a Hampshire uniformed policeman, was inspecting Phlox Carmichael's house-boat. They found a man repairing—almost, it might be claimed, replacing—the damaged gang-plank. They told

him that they had come to look over the house-boat and, as they were speaking, Phlox himself came out of the little galley. He smiled genially at the officers.

“Good-day,” he said, “Can I help you?”

“With your permission, sir,” said the detective-sergeant, “I should like to examine your boat.”

“Surely, surely. But with what object in view, may I ask?”

“Well, sir, that was a very nasty accident you had here. We understand that it could have been fatal.”

“Indeed it could. My sister and I were most fortunate—*most* fortunate. You will see that I am taking steps to remedy the matter. How long will you be now, Sims?”

“She’s just on done, sir. Safe enough to use if these—these gentlemen wants to step aboard.”

“How did *you* get aboard, Mr. Carmichael?” asked the sergeant. “Our information was that you were stopping over at Wandles, in the vicarage there.”

“Oh, I see! You were expecting to examine my home in my absence, were you? I am not well versed in the law, but I should have thought that was very wrong of you—very wrong indeed. What could you have hoped, in any case, to find out?”

The detective-sergeant, in unabashed tones, said that he held a search-warrant and produced it. It had been his own idea to obtain one, as he was a little put out by the unorthodox methods sometimes employed by Gavin, and it had taken him sufficiently long, on the previous day, to get the warrant for him to be justified in postponing the visit to the house-boat until this particular morning. However, he wished now, with all his heart, that he had taken the questionable course dictated by his superior. It would have been infinitely preferable to conduct the thorough search which was under contemplation *not* in the presence of the owner. He answered Carmichael’s question.

"I am not at liberty to tell you what I'm looking for, sir. I hope, however, that you will give the constable and myself every facility. I trust we shall not need to trouble you long."

"You may search my boat for as long as you like, but I shall answer no questions, and if you see fit to remove any of my property I shall require a receipt for it."

"Fair enough, sir, so, by your leave—" He stepped across the three-foot gap between the boat and the bank with athletic ease. The uniformed man made a more sedate entry by using the new gang-plank. Phlox watched in silence as they searched the tiny galley, then passed to the cabin which Marigold used and so to the large, well-lighted saloon in which the brother and sister lived and in which Phlox slept. This, apart from a small bathroom, an Elsan, and the open sun-deck, comprised the total accommodation of the house-boat.

The search did not take long, but it was thorough and when it was over Phlox gravely commended the officers.

"A very neat effort," he said approvingly. "I trust you have found your labours rewarding."

"Too soon to say that, sir. Have you any objection to my taking these letters and these receipted bills for closer examination?"

"Of course I have—every objection, but I don't suppose that will stop you from pursuing your nefarious activities. Really, one might as well be living in a police-state! What on earth do you want them for, anyway?"

"Would you have the same objection if I examined them in your presence, sir?" asked the sergeant, avoiding an answer to Phlox's question.

"No, no. An objection, naturally, as I see no reason why my private affairs should be the concern of the police, but not so great an objection, as I shall be in a position to keep a watch on my property. You do not propose to purloin any of it, I trust?"

"Purloin is not a word to use to a police officer when he is discharging his duty," said the tall young sergeant, in dignified rebuke.

"I see. Very well. I have nothing to hide, but I confess I should be glad to know how your activities tie up with my sister's unfortunate accident."

"They may not so tie up, sir. I have my orders."

He seated himself at the table in the saloon, in a chair which faced the broad flow of the river. The constable sat on a wooden, cushion-covered bench from which he could, if he wished, obtain a view of the bank against which, except for the three feet of water into which Marigold had fallen, the house-boat was moored. As the constable untied the neat bundles of letters and handed them over, the sergeant rapidly perused them. As each bundle was finished with, the constable neatly and carefully tied it up again.

"Thank you, sir," said the sergeant. "There is no need for me to take any further action over these."

"Oh! Then perhaps you will *now* be good enough to tell me exactly what you think you've been looking for!"

"Evidence that Miss Carmichael's accident was deliberately planned," said the sergeant. "That's what I've been looking for."

"Deliberately planned? I don't understand you!"

"The suggestion was made, sir, and had to be dealt with."

"You mean to tell me that somebody reported me as having *pushed* my sister into the water? I can credit most things of my evil-minded neighbours, but this is incredible! May I be told . . .?"

"I am not at liberty, sir, to give you any more information, except, in their own interest and yours, to assure you that it was *not* any of your neighbours."

"Oh!" said Phlox. "Oh!" He flushed deeply and swallowed. "I see! In that case, if the suggestion was made by Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley, I wonder you did not

charge me with attempted murder and march me away and have done with it!"

"Come, sir," said the sergeant, "there's no need to say things like that. I'm sorry we've had to inconvenience you, but there it is. Good-day, sir."

The police returned to Culminster. Gavin, as the sergeant had hoped he would do, had returned, and was with the Superintendent at Culminster police station. The sergeant made his report and was told to go off and get himself some lunch. When he had gone, the Superintendent puffed out his cheeks and looked at Gavin. The young man nodded gravely.

"I'll point out to him the error of his ways," he said, "but I won't do it in front of you. He's a smart lad. He'll learn. His instructions were to go there yesterday in the hope that Carmichael would still be at Wandles, out of the way. In that case, the young idiot could have snooped round that boat in peace, and without alarming the quarry."

"Well, I'm damned!" said the Superintendent. "So Scotland Yard works by breaking and entering, does it?"

Gavin grinned.

"Not as a general rule," he said, "but at last I've got enough on that wriggling snake to justify taking my gloves off to him."

"Anyway, you've found Plinlimmon's boat."

"I have. What's more, I've got a description of the man who moored it at Maidenhead, and it is *not* a description of Plinlimmon."

"Carmichael?"

"To the life. I'm off there—to his house-boat, I mean—to get him to answer a few pertinent questions. He's been seen talking to Hilary Beads near the place where her body was found. He can explain that to me, for a start. Then I've had a tip from Dame Beatrice which I intend to use."

"Oh?"

“Yes. I called up my wife yesterday from Shillingford, and she asked me to hang on, as Dame Beatrice wanted to speak to me. The Dame then advanced the startling but by no means unlikely theory that Miss Beads had to be eliminated because she knew that *her sister*, Phlox Carmichael’s wife, had disappeared and she hitched on to the idea that the two Carmichaels knew something about it. Then there’s the question of the handbag. He can explain to me why he was seen to chuck it into the river. By the time he’s finished explaining, I hope to have enough to charge him with. I don’t think we’ll ever prove that he killed his wife, but I hope to get him for Hilary Beads’ murder. It’s that or Plinlimmon, and the Beads affair seems the more likely at the moment.”

“Well, I wish you luck.”

“I only hope he’s still on the house-boat, and that my sergeant’s zeal hasn’t scared him away. If it has, we may have to lose a lot of time catching up with him. He’s a slippery customer and he’s got brains. Besides, he’s had one bit of bad luck and it may have got him worried.”

“You mean running into Miss Beads that first time in Wandles Parva.”

“Yes. Well, I’ve had lunch, so I think I’ll be pushing off. The sooner I strike, the better now.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Gathering Phlox

“Everyman is not a proper Champion for Truth nor fit to take up the Gauntlet in the cause of Verity.”

Ibid (Section 6)

It was clear, when Gavin arrived at the house-boat, that Phlox had not expected another visit from the police so soon. He was seated on the open end of the boat in a deck chair with a foot-extension, and he was leaning back against a cushion in an attitude of relaxation and ease.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Carmichael,” said Gavin. “May I come aboard?”

“I suppose,” said Phlox, looking up from the book he was reading, “that you’ve come to apologise for the abominable behaviour of the two policemen who’ve already been here.”

“Not exactly,” said Gavin, stepping on board by way of the new gang-plank. “Had this mended, I see.”

“Practically replaced, I’m glad to say.”

“Quite. Shall we go into your cabin, or wherever you go when you’re indoors?”

“I see no reason for that. If you haven’t come with apologies, I don’t know why you’re here.”

"To caution you that anything you say, from now on, I shall take down in writing and ask you to sign. Later, it may be used in evidence."

"Against me? But I haven't the slightest intention of incriminating myself. I should find it immensely difficult to do so, as a matter of actual fact, since, to the best of my knowledge and belief, I have committed no criminal act."

"I hope for your sake that that is true. Matters have been brought to our notice, however, which need an explanation from you."

"Yes? What have I any need to explain?"

"We have evidence that you met Miss Hilary Beads on the evening of her death. Can you tell me anything about that meeting?"

"I don't remember it."

"No? Let me assist you. You had put your sister into the convent, thus leaving yourself free for three days. During the evening of the first of these days you met Miss Beads by assignation in the grounds of the Manor House. You were seen there by a most reliable witness."

"One witness?"

"One witness."

"Isn't my word as good as his or hers?"

"I am afraid not, Mr. Carmichael. She has nothing either to lose or to gain by giving us this information."

"What does that prove?"

"Merely that she is a reliable witness."

"What else do you need to ask me?"

"No questions, but I would like to put certain suggestions before you."

"I do not entertain suggestions from the police."

"No? Well, I will give you a sample. I suggest that Miss Hilary Beads was your sister-in-law."

"What?"

"Just that. Mr. Carmichael, I don't think you realise how deadly is the evidence against you. You are known to have

met Miss Beads twice during Wednesday, May twenty-second. On the second occasion you killed her, and you placed her body in the wine-cellar of the Manor House. Subsequently, you removed her body to the top of the observation tower where you hoped and expected that it would remain unobserved until, like that of your wife, it had become a skeleton."

"This would be a monstrous accusation, except that it is all nonsense," said Phlox Carmichael. "You had better confront me with this precious witness of yours! I'll soon change her tune!"

"We shall see," said Gavin, in an equable manner. "Another witness, I may add, heard a conversation between yourself and Miss Beads. Now, touching the matter of old Plinlimmon and his ancient motor-cruiser . . ."

"Plinlimmon? Oh, I saw in the newspaper that the old fool had drowned himself. Drunk, and tumbled overboard, I imagine."

"May I ask how you come to be acquainted with Plinlimmon, Mr. Carmichael?"

"Me? Acquainted with him? Well, when you use the same river . . ."

"Mr. Carmichael, we have established that until he undertook his last trip up the Thames, Plinlimmon was established by the Chelsea Embankment, where he got his living by servicing other people's craft and doing various odd jobs there."

"Well, what of it?"

"I spent time and trouble in attempting to establish that you had lived in Chelsea before you came here just over two years ago. I was unable to do so for what I consider to be a very good reason. You have changed your name."

"Ridiculous!"

"Then please furnish me with this information: if you have not changed your name, why was I unable to trace you on the electors' register?"

"I've never bothered to vote. I have not the faintest interest in politics."

"But you have lived in Chelsea and you knew Plinlimmon well."

"I have never lived in Chelsea—that is to say, not exactly *lived* there. I have Bohemian friends—literally, as it happens—Czechs. I used to visit them frequently. *They* introduced me to Plinlimmon."

"And when you visited these friends, you made considerable use of the Chelsea public library?"

"I—yes, I suppose I did."

"The *Chelsea* public library, Mr. Carmichael?"

Phlox stared angrily at his interlocutor.

"I wish I could see the point of your questions," he said.

"When I was researching in Chelsea, Plinlimmon gave away the fact that he knew you. He also gave me the tip to visit the *Fulham* public library. There was no doubt that he knew you pretty well . . ."

"I've explained that."

". . . and that he had serviced the boat you used to keep at his moorings. There is no doubt, either, that, after my visit, Plinlimmon tipped you off by telephone—we have traced the call—informing you that I had seen him and questioned him. You knew him so well as a double-crossing petty scoundrel that you thought it necessary to eliminate him before he could obtain a reward as informer by giving us some really substantial information about you?"

"Such as?"

"I can think of several things that we should have been glad to know. It would have saved us from having to ferret them out for ourselves. However, we *have* ferreted them out. Now, Mr. Carmichael, I would like your explanation of the following facts: first, Plinlimmon took his cruiser up as far as Abingdon. The cruiser has been identified and Plinlimmon recognised from my description. You also were

recognised on those upper reaches. You are known to have been there."

"I made the trip? All right."

"Plinlimmon's body was found off Chiswick Eyot."

"So I learned from the newspapers."

"But his motor-cruiser is lying, with a great many similar boats, at Maidenhead. What is the explanation of that?"

"How on earth should I know?"

"Mr. Carmichael, I am not satisfied with your attitude. You have not resolved my doubts." With this, Gavin got up from his chair. "I must see whether your sister cannot help me."

"You smooth swine!" said Phlox, hysterically. "You leave my sister alone! Leave her alone, I say! Leave her alone!" His face worked as though he was going to weep. Then he controlled himself. "Marigold is a congenital liar," he said coldly. "I wish you joy of any information *she* gives you!"

"Then perhaps you would like to sign my notes before I see her."

Phlox was silent, except that he tapped his finger-nails irresolutely against the wooden arm of his chair. He gazed down at the strip of matting on the floor. Plainly he was gathering his thoughts.

"You've questioned me in what I consider to be a grossly unfair manner. I protest very strongly against your methods. Unfortunately for you, you elected to come here alone, so that there are no witnesses to this conversation."

"You are fortunate in that the conversation has not been recorded," said Gavin drily. "I suggest that you accompany me now to the Culminster police station where you can make your own statement in front of witnesses and where it can be taken down and signed. I have cautioned you, remember."

Phlox nodded.

"That is agreeable to me," he said. He rose. Gavin followed him ashore and drove him to Culminster. He left

him in an ante-room with a constable to keep him company and went in himself to speak to the Superintendent.

"I've brought Phlox Carmichael," he said. "He's prepared to make a statement."

"How did you manage it?"

"By asking some rather awkward questions and by threatening, in my best blackmailing manner, to dig the truth out of his sister."

"So that's why you went alone?"

"Yes, it is. Now I want to ask Dame Beatrice to come here. As soon as she arrives, we can bring Carmichael in and have his yarn taken down."

Dame Beatrice did not keep them waiting long. It was not many miles from the Stone House to Culminster police station. As soon as she arrived, Phlox and a shorthand writer came in and the statement was taken down. It began reasonably enough, Dame Beatrice thought, considering the kind of people the Carmichaels were and where their interests lay. After stressing that he had been under undue and unfair pressure from the police, and so thought it imperative to make "my voluntary and true account of what really has occurred in this neighbourhood—that is to say, in and around the village of Wandles Parva, where, as *some* people know" (he met Dame Beatrice's eye) "the vicar and his wife are my very good friends—what has occurred, I say, since the twenty-second of May." He paused, as though to assemble the material of his speech in his mind, and then continued:

"On that day, my sister and I decided to go down to Wandles Parva, although we knew that we could not be put up at the vicarage, our accustomed hostelry, until the end of the week.

"Our reasons for going there at that time were that the weather was fine enough for us to begin a project we had often discussed with the vicar, that is the tracing of an indicated but undiscovered Roman road, and we also

wanted to see some finds of Roman origin which had been dug up fortuitously on a local smallholding. We had heard of these by letter from the vicarage.

"We traced the known part of the road, but it seemed to peter out, so we made our way to Wandles, with the intention of obtaining accommodation for the nights of Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, until we could take up lodging at the vicarage. Our plan was changed by circumstances which we could not have foreseen. We met and accompanied a school party which was going to carry out further excavations on the smallholding. This, we thought, might be interesting and might even result in further finds, or even in the discovery of the foundations of a villa. The vicar has long held the theory that a Roman villa existed in the neighbourhood of Wandles Parva. However, nothing was found at the time.

"Later on, we watched while a party of girls in charge of two religious took up the cudgels—or, rather, of course, the spades and trowels. These young people had obviously been taught the rudiments of correct procedure in excavating the site, but the results of their labours were negligible. However, the upshot of it all was that my sister was enabled to live at the convent until the following Saturday morning, whilst I myself slept under the stars. Fortunately the weather remained clement, and I joined my sister on the Saturday, as we had arranged.

"The vicar, intent upon his Roman road and still convinced, in spite of the abortive efforts of the pupils, that a villa had existed in the neighbourhood, took us along with him on the following Monday to dig on the smallholding. We found a skeleton. I now know it to be the skeleton of a woman. At the time I believed it to be that of a Roman or, more probably, a Saxon—a man, of course—slain in battle, since the skull was cleft as though with a heavy sword.

"Later, after it had been established that the skeleton had but recently been the framework of a living person, I

was closely questioned by the police, as I had been present when it was uncovered, and I was able to call upon the vicar in support of my statement that, although I had been present, mine was not the initial discovery of the cadaver.

“Since that discovery, I seem to have been under the constant supervision of one person and another, some authorised, possibly, to follow my movements”—he gave the Superintendent a slight bow—“others very definitely *not* so authorised.” He gazed fixedly at Dame Beatrice, who returned his look with a basilisk stare which caused him involuntarily to lower his eyes.

“I have been followed,” he continued, “and deliberately spied upon; my every movement, it seems to me, has been noted, and a wrong construction, in most cases, has been put upon it. I demand that this persecution be withdrawn before my whole reputation is in shreds. Every advantage has been taken of the fact that, troubled by the aspersions cast upon me after the discovery that the skeleton was of recent date, my delicately balanced nervous system began to play tricks and I consulted one whom I believed to be not only a psychiatrist of repute but one of whose probity I could be certain. I have been deeply disappointed. A flippant approach was made to my malady, which was one of temporary mental derangement, and from which I am by no means recovered, and, since that time, suspicion after suspicion has been laid upon me.

“Upon information derived by the police from this same source, I am now accused of having been concerned in the death of a man named Plinlimmon for the flimsy, if not downright ridiculous reason that I happened to hire this man to take me in his motor cruiser up the river so that I might visit the historic town of Abingdon. Of the fact that the body was found off Chiswick no note whatever has been taken.”

“Oh, yes, it has,” said Gavin, under his breath. Phlox appeared not to have heard him. He continued:

“Further, the discovery of another dead body at the Manor House in Wandles Parva has given rise to another accusation that I knew the dead woman and had killed her. Both suggestions are worthy only of the scorn in which I hold them. That is all I have to say.”

“Thank you, Mr. Carmichael,” said the Superintendent, in a dangerously mild tone. “The constable who has taken down your statement in shorthand will now type it out in full and perhaps you will be good enough to stay and sign it. If, of course, you wish to amend it in any way before you sign, you are at liberty to do that.”

He was shown out.

“Well?” said Gavin, looking at Dame Beatrice.

“A certain amount of sub-editing is required before we accept his statement,” she replied.

“Right. Hand out the dope.” He drew out a notebook. “Where do we go from here?”

“Having checked his statement, we then examine it for errors of omission. In fact, I think we must take the omissions first. The most interesting one, perhaps, is that he has failed to mention those meetings with Hilary Beads on Wednesday, May twenty-second.”

“I mentioned them to *him*, though! He knows we know of them.”

“He admits that he slept in the open on that and the two succeeding nights, but he does not mention where.”

“Well, we’re pretty sure it was in the grounds of the Manor House, if not in the house itself.”

“He mentioned the trip he took with Plinlimmon, but makes no attempt to explain why, if Plinlimmon’s body was found off Chiswick Eyot, his boat was found by you at Maidenhead.”

“He’ll have to tell us a great deal more about that trip before we’re satisfied.”

“What about his disposal of Hilary Beads’ handbag in the river? He didn’t mention that, either.”

"There was nothing in the handbag to incriminate him, of course. When you handed it over I examined it most carefully."

"There must have been, at one time. Did you notice that the handbag had a slightly torn lining?"

"Yes, and there had been what I believe to be a visiting-card in it. It got thrown away, you tell me."

"Dear me! We do not seem to be blest by luck, do we?"

"Well, I don't know about that. I think we may soon have enough on him to justify his arrest. Any other omissions?"

"Well, I think he's been screening his sister."

"So you've suggested before. Laura told me."

"You see, Phlox and Marigold have always had much in common. Phlox has been the leading spirit, of course, and Marigold has always been more than content to follow him. The wife created a problem, and Marigold, I think, solved that problem in a simple and terrible way."

"You mean that Marigold hit the wife on the head, and that Phlox bore the brunt and hid the body?"

"I feel certain of it. I am also certain that the murders of Hilary Beads and Jack Plinlimmon were undertaken by Phlox to cover up the murder of Mrs. Carmichael."

"Would any brother take such a risk?"

"Phlox appears to me to have done so."

"And Marigold's ducking in the Thames?"

"I think he was tired of shouldering all the responsibility, and so tried to be rid of her, but, in the end, he had to rescue her. He couldn't help himself. On the other hand, of course, there's nothing to rule out accident, or even attempted suicide."

"Attempted suicide?"

"Marigold is both the stronger and the weaker partner, I feel. By the way, I have had that sliver of brownish stain analysed—the one I took from the conservatory of the Manor House, you know. It is not blood. I did not think it

was. Just part of the general trend of the present day towards dirt and destruction.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Flowers of Sulphur

"I confess I have perused them all, and can discover nothing that may startle a discreet belief."

Ibid (Section 20)

DAME BEATRICE, in casting her bread upon the waters by rewarding young Eustace Trumble for his information about the drowning of Hilary Beads' handbag, had had no thought that it might return to her after many days. But while Gavin and Dame Beatrice were in conference, a newly-washed and very bashful boy of thirteen was on his way to the Stone House.

Because he was bashful (for bashfulness does not preclude villainy) he went round to the side door. Here he was met by Célestine, who demanded to know his business. He asked to speak to "the lady, the old 'un." Célestine shrugged and told him to stay where he was. She then informed Dame Beatrice of his arrival.

"Ask him his name," said Dame Beatrice. It appeared that Célestine had already done this. His name was Henry Briggs.

"Turned out of the church choir for bad behaviour the year before last," commented Dame Beatrice. "I will see him in here."

Shown in, Henry proved to be a stocky, freckled boy with an untrustworthily ingenuous countenance and a wary eye. He shuffled his feet.

"Well, Henry," said Dame Beatrice, "what can I do for you?"

Henry cleared his throat and glanced at Gavin.

"Answer Dame Beatrice," said the latter, with a friendly grin. "Neither of us will eat you."

Thus encouraged, Henry blurted out:

"You give my mate 'arf a crown for telling you summat."

"Your mate being Eustace Trumble."

"That's right, mum, your ladyship. He 'ad 'arf a crown for telling you about an 'andbag which Mr. Carmichael chucked in the river."

"We need no more information about the handbag, Henry, thank you."

"No, but I seen it in her 'and when she was talkin' to Mr. Carmichael the day before, and I 'eared what she said."

"How do you know Mr. Carmichael's name, I wonder?"

"When I was in the choir, Mr. Carmichael used to sing along of us when he stayed at the vicarage; that's 'ow."

"Of course. Sit down, Henry, and let us hear what you have to say."

Gavin drew forward a chair so that the boy was facing the light. Then he sat by the door and took out his notebook.

"I wasn't at school that day," Henry began. "I goes to the County Secondary in Culminster be bus and that morning I isn't feelin' too good, so me mum says I can stop at 'ome and she'll write a note. By dinner-time I feels better, but I can't get to school because there isn't a school bus, see, so I says to me mum as I think I'll go out for a bit, so she says not to let anybody see me, else she might get into trouble for me bein' out but not at school."

"I can appreciate that," said Dame Beatrice. "So?"

"So I goes along, pretty careful, and, when I sees somebody coming, I gets over the gate and I crawls along be'ind the 'edge."

"Yes?"

"Well, then, they meets this posh sort of lady as have stayed at the vicarage before, and Mr. Carmichael and the lady as goes with 'im, and they haves a bit of a talk."

"Can you remember what they said?"

"Well, some of it, I reckon. The gentleman asks this other lady for somewhere to stay, and she names Farmer Topps. Then she writes something down and gives it to him. Then she takes off her sun-specs and the gentleman seems to be ever so surprised and the other lady—the one what was with 'im—she gives a kind of a screech, and then the lady what they met up with, she says as how she must get something out of it . . ."

"Rewarded, do you mean?" asked Dame Beatrice.

"Ah. Then the gentleman, he writes something on a little bit of cardboard and gives it to her, and she walks one way and him and the lady with 'im walks the other way and meets them classy little kids from the payin' school. But, before that, he says, 'Let me know when you wants your little reward, won't you?' And before that again, she says, 'I shall expect to be'—I don't know the next word, but I reckon it meant he'd got to give her something, like what I says before."

"Recompensed?" asked Dame Beatrice. The boy eyed her shrewdly.

"Could of been," he said.

"Interesting," said Dame Beatrice. "Which day of the week was this, did you say?"

"It was the Wednesday, because I missed Science with Mr. Graves. I likes Science."

"Good for you. Now, then, Henry, I must check this. It may be important and it may not."

"She was carrying an 'andbag," said Henry, on the defensive.

"Most women do. Describe her appearance."

"She was dressed posh."

"Yes?"

"She 'ad on a sort of a mixed-up skirt, mostly grey and green and brown, and tidy sort of shoes—they was brown—and a sort of a yellow jersey with a woolly little coat what matched each other and she didn't 'ave no 'aat, but she did 'ave great big sun-glasses—very black they looked—with real sparklers on the rims."

"And you received the impression that the man and the other woman were surprised to see her?"

"Ah, they was an' all. Knocked cold, they was. The gentleman, 'e calls 'er 'llary, so I knows 'e knows 'er. You don't call strange women by their first names."

"Hilary? Are you sure?"

"Ah, I be sure, all right."

"Well," said Gavin, when the boy, having received the half-crown he had come in search of, had been dismissed, "there's no doubt that the whole thing begins to tie up. We have independent witnesses, none of whom can be ignored, that there was a strong connection between the Carmichaels and Hilary Beads."

"I do not like putting children into the witness box," said Dame Beatrice, "but I suspect that it will not come to that. We have established, as you say, that the Carmichaels and Hilary Beads were much more than chance-met acquaintances. And then there is the handbag, of course. Phlox appears, in the end, to have acted very foolishly. He took the fearful risk of moving that skeleton from the top of the tower (to whose door he must, of course, have made himself a duplicate key), he allowed himself to be seen and overheard when he risked using Hilary Beads' first name—the one thing of all others which convinced me that Henry was speaking the truth—and he allowed himself to be seen

in company with the boatman Plinlimmon at a time when nobody would have expected them to be together.”

“What I can’t understand,” said Gavin, “is how Plinlimmon knew where to contact him after Laura and I had been to Chelsea that day.”

“They must have kept in touch with one another, although for what reason we don’t know.”

“You don’t think Phlox followed us that day?”

“Not Phlox, but—I think you’ve hit it—the almost unnoticeable Marigold. Yes, that ties up! Marigold followed you, tipped off Phlox that you’d been talking to Plinlimmon and then got cold feet when she found out that Phlox had killed the old man to shut his mouth. Phlox then tipped her into the river and . . .” said Laura.

“And rescued her. Don’t forget that.”

“Yes, I know. He’d done enough to frighten her into silence, though, I suppose.”

“I am not at all sure that it wasn’t an accident. Consanguinity,” said Dame Beatrice, “is a strange thing. Blood is much thicker than water. It is established that new blood is a good thing to introduce into families, but the old ties remain. I don’t think I should have liked Hilary Beads,” she added, with apparent inconsequence, “but, that, of course, does not excuse Phlox for having murdered her.”

“Quite. Well, with this last bit of evidence, I have enough to pull him in and ask him some very (I trust) awkward questions.”

The arrest of Phlox Carmichael brought an immediate reaction from Marigold. She appeared at the Stone House brandishing a *kukri*. Célestine opened the door to her and gave a screech of Gallic horror.

“What make you with that?” she then demanded.

“I want vengeance!” shouted Marigold. “Vengeance upon the serpent who is taking away my brother’s life!”

The serpent in question, hearing the shouting, appeared in the doorway and put Célestine gently aside. Célestine

slipped into the kitchen and whispered urgently to her husband.

"So it wasn't a slasher," said Dame Beatrice. "I was wrong. I had never thought of a Gurkha knife, but, of course, it was the very thing."

"I will show you that it is," said Marigold, quietly and simply. "I have come here to kill you."

"Then I had better come outside. It will save a mess on the carpet. I wonder whether I shall bleed as much as your sister-in-law did? Lead the way to the Stone of Sacrifice."

Marigold stared at her. Then she nodded and turned towards the gate. Dame Beatrice grabbed her wrist, and twisted the weapon away, as Henri and George came running out of the side door. Marigold screamed.

"And now," said Dame Beatrice, "you had better come indoors and tell me all about it."

Marigold went with her into the house. She sat down and began to cry. Dame Beatrice handed the *kukri* to George, who had followed them into the room to ask whether she had any orders for the car.

"Yes," she said. "Take this thing and give it to the Superintendent at Culminster police station. He will be glad of it as an exhibit in his case against Mr. and Miss Carmichael. They may have cause to regret their passionate collecting of souvenirs. This," she added, speaking to Marigold, "you presented to the vicar after you had killed your sister-in-law with it."

"What are you going to do with me?" asked Marigold, without attempting to answer the accusation.

"I wish I could save your brother," said Dame Beatrice. "I should still like to know, though, why he took the fearful risk of moving his wife's body from the tower and immuring it in the smallholding."

Marigold's eyes widened.

"You don't understand Phlox," she said. "His is a sensitive nature. How could he leave the two sisters up

there together? They'd have seen one another's ghosts.
Enough to make anybody believe in eternity!"

"It would be rational so to believe," said Dame Beatrice,
with a slight sigh for the endlessness of things.

About the Author



Gladys Mitchell was born in the village of Cowley, Oxford, in April 1901. She was educated at the Rothschild School in Brentford, the Green School in Isleworth, and at Goldsmiths and University Colleges in London. For many years Miss Mitchell taught history and English, swimming, and games. She retired from this work in 1950 but became so bored without the constant stimulus and irritation of teaching that she accepted a post at the Matthew Arnold School in Staines, where she taught English and history, wrote the annual school play, and coached hurdling. She was a member of the Detection Club, the PEN, the Middlesex

Education Society, and the British Olympic Association. Her father's family are Scots, and a Scottish influence has appeared in some of her books.